TRAVELERS

by

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(Under the Direction of Judith Ortiz Cofer)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a collection of short stories that explores interrelated topics such as family, responsibility, and personal growth.

The Introduction provides insight into my composing processes as a creative writer, primarily through an extended analogy—my comparison of writing and reading fiction to no limit hold 'em poker. I reveal how the nuances of this game, particularly any interactions with fellow poker players, are similar to the shading and tracing of fictional characters, situations, and devices. Telling a story and bluffing your opponents are both means to the same end: creating a believable lie based on experience, intuition, and skill. Ultimately, however, this Introduction does not tell anyone "how" to read this collection but simply reminds us of the ways in which the smallest details can make an impact in transforming a mundane moment into something memorable, even life-changing.

Each of the stories in this collection presents characters on a journey of some sort, whether figurative or literal—more often, both. For example, in "Samaritan," the first story in the collection, a boy's thirty-mile walk to his uncle's house leads a delivery man to contemplate his own life's journey while helping the boy reach his destination. Many of the characters are searching for something, but they have not yet reached the point in their lives at which they can name or imagine it. These intangibles are key in stories such as "Debts," "Possessions," and "The Distances Wear on You," among others. In "Objects Awaiting Motion," Les struggles with his own search for meaning but eventually seems to find it in suicide, leaving his wife and children "awaiting motion," at the cusp of their own journey without him.

Finally, the title of the collection, "Travelers," comes from "Just Act as Normal as Possible," in which the narrator reflects upon his father's difficult journey through addiction, rehab, and recovery: "You had the look of a traveler who had been away from home for a long time." All these travelers, sooner or later, experience the commonplace and the extraordinary, the burdens of life and its joys, as they grope toward their destinations.

INDEX WORDS: short story, addiction, fatherhood, marriage

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For Misty, always

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INTRODUCTION

The Rail

I discovered no limit hold ‘em poker at the same time I came back to writing fiction. One night my friend Hunter took me to play in a hold ‘em tournament at a dim pool parlor called the Brass Rail. He explained the basics as we drove there. I already knew the values of most poker hands—a pair, a set, a straight, a flush—from playing five card stud with my grandmother when I was just a kid and we both couldn’t sleep. We bet with pieces of peppermint and butter scotch candy.

As Hunter laid out the few immutable rules, the patterns of the game, it all seemed simple enough. And yet what I discovered that night and many nights afterward was a game involving endless variables. It required careful calculation as well as gut instinct. But the side of the game that really drew me in was the realization that above all else poker was a matter of reading people, their intentions, their personalities, their fears and desires.[1] This need to decipher and explore the intricacies of human behavior is also what drew me back to writing short stories.

In both pursuits something very important is at stake. Some may say, for poker especially, but also for any writer who hopes to make a living from his art, what is at stake is simply money. Of course, many of the poker players we see now on television are fabulously wealthy. Some writers do okay, as well. But at the Brass Rail, we didn’t play for money. If you won the tournament that night, you got a twenty dollar bar tab for next time. That was it. So why

did forty or more people show up two times a night on Tuesdays and Thursdays? They loved what the game itself gave to them. They loved what they learned about themselves and other people. They probably liked the camaraderie, the way they felt connected with a diverse group of individuals who would sit down and talk and laugh and compete with each other for a couple of hours. If you think about it, this may also be a fair assessment of why people read stories. They want that connection. They want to be part of a character's world, because it brings the readers closer to their own world.

Most professional writers will tell students or aspiring writers, "I don't do it for the money." Don't, they warn, expect accolades and fat book contracts. Invariably you will fail if this is your reason for writing. Unlike poker, writing is a solitary and ultimately rather feeble way to make a living. But while the act is solitary, the writer continually lives with and explores the nuances of a whole host of people. He also must develop a sense for his potential readers. He must figure out how to tell his characters' stories so that these theoretical readers will see what he sees. Writers and readers; we are hopelessly entwined. Writers *are* readers in so many ways. This is where the Brass Rail comes back in. For me, it was a source of material and information, a controlled lab experiment, and a proving ground, all rolled into one. Could I tell a story, make a bluff, reel in the suckers, seduce and convince my reader or opponent? It was all there.

Bad Tells, Good Tells: The Details Better Add Up

In my favorite commercial for the on-line poker site Full Tilt, Danish pro Gus Hansen is shown betting a progressively larger number of chips until, finally, his opponent folds. Hansen's voice over, however, is the interesting part. He begins by saying, "I'm about to tell you a story." How perfect I thought when I first saw the commercial. This is where all artists start: I want to

tell you something; I want to convince you that this is true. Hansen goes on to explain, "It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Fact or fiction. Doesn't matter. It's all how I tell it." Here Hansen is moving on to something intrinsic to the craft of storytelling. In order for the play he is making to be convincing, the details must add up, the parts must fit together in a satisfactory, compelling way. In poker, the "story" involves what kind of hand you might have. Hansen must create a narrative which will induce the intended action: either he wants a call or a fold from the other players. How he tells the story is of vital importance. Now in the parlance of poker a "tell" is also some bit of behavior—a shaking hand, a sigh or cough, a casual toss of a chip—which belies the story the player is telling. A "tell" alerts those who pay attention that something isn't quite right. Then you generally see this scenario play out. The suspicious player says, "I don't buy that re-raise. I don't think you have it. I call." Then the abashed bluffer nods, averts his eyes, and throws his cards into the muck (the center of the table where discarded cards are gathered). He is embarrassed not because he tried to bluff someone with a good hand or because he just lost some money he shouldn't have. He is embarrassed because he told his tale so poorly, that is was so transparent, that it brought the other player out of the illusion that he did, indeed, have a very big hand. The "telling," the details, were all wrong. John Gardner also alludes to this potential problem when he begins the "Common Errors" section of *The Art of Fiction* with this pronouncement: "The single most important notion in the theory of fiction [. . .] is that of the vivid and continuous dream." He goes on to elucidate this position by focusing upon the concrete, sensual descriptions the writer must employ to ground the reader in the reality of a situation, a created world:

> According to this notion, the writer sets up a dramatized action in which we are given the signals that make us "see" the setting, characters, and events;

> that is, he does not tell us about them in abstract terms, like an essayist, but gives us images that appeal to our senses[. . .]. In bad or unsatisfying fiction, this fictional dream is interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist. (97)

Just like the clumsy bluffer, the awkward writer is always supplying the wrong "tells." The details don't convince us.

Much like Gardner, in his book *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* Peter Turchi argues that writing is about seduction, drawing the reader into a new and completely engrossing world. And while Turchi's grand metaphor for the writing process is the writer as mapmaker, many of his pronouncements fall in line with Gus Hansen's simple dictum: "Fact or fiction. Doesn't matter. It's all how I tell it." In a discussion of what constitutes realism or reality, Turchi contends, "The first lie of the map—also the first lie of fiction—is that it is the truth. And a great deal of a map's, or story's, or poem's authority results from its ability to convince us of its authority" (73). Where does this authority come from? It comes from the accretion of simple observations, ones which will convince us that what we are reading about, that these airy people made of nothing but words, could really exist, could, in fact, be living down the street. This is what Flannery O'Connor is talking about when she praises Flaubert for his description of a very minor character, a clerk, who stops to listen as Emma Bovary plays the piano. She states that "Flaubert had to create a believable village to put Emma in." And, ultimately, O'Connor believes that "the fiction writer is much less immediately concerned with grand ideas and bristling emotions than he is with putting list slippers on the clerk" (70).

*

At one point during Terry Zwigoff's documentary *Crumb*, the counter-culture artist known for his fantastical comic strips pulls out a book of photographs. Crumb pages through picture after picture of ordinary and banal modern landscapes: telephone pole wires stretching across a cluster of houses, street signs, liquor stores, the facades of abandoned buildings, and the like. "You can't make this stuff up," he says. These pictures reveal an important lesson about the creation of any imaginative world. All fiction or art must be rooted by specific details and items. A reader or viewer must feel that the topography of that world extends outside the border of the page, the strip, the canvas. Even a world as skewed as Crumb's, or, for the fictional equivalent, as Kafka's, incorporates and juxtaposes the casual, blatantly physical minutia of our world with the strange and extraordinary: the terrifying image of Crumb abusing a headless Devil Girl or K finding himself confronted with a court of raucous old men in the attic of an apartment building is made concrete by the design of the wallpaper or children playing in the hallway. We accept these visions because they maintain a firm foothold in what we believe to be the "real," the photographic detail not the imaginary one. These little items, intrusions of the tangible or spatial, maintain the umbilical cord between the reader's sense of himself and his world and the writer's very particular universe.

The relationship between the fictional world and what might be termed "reality" requires a writer to perform a delicate high wire act, or to use another circus metaphor, it is as if the author is continually juggling several globes at once. Or perhaps it is a shell game—now you see it, now you don't. Whatever the writer has in mind for her story, concessions must be made to the commonplace. Characters exist, they breathe, they walk down the street and cars pass, some kind of physical reality intrudes—perhaps it is a bird singing outside the window or, in the case of Joy Williams's story "Taking Care," the preacher Jones finding a dead rabbit in the snow.

Certainly a strange intrusion, but one that brings us and Jones out of his solipsistic grief, makes him part of the larger world of suffering and death. No matter how interiorly we are drawn into the workings of a character's mind, these *things* bring us back, make that place seem like our place, our neighborhood, too.

In an essay on the fictional voice, Chuck Wachtel describes the decisions a writer must make to enmesh himself and his readers in a story. The author "conceive[s] a world and its people, enter[s] it, and make[s] decisions as to what is essential and what is obvious. Of course, we do this deliberately, but also [. . .] we do this as an automatic aspect of the process of narration, occurring within the natural sweep of our own voices" (67). For Wachtel, the decision to use certain objects or details to paint an imagined scene is an integral part of any writer's voice. He points to Nabokov's lecture on Anton Chekhov's great short story "Lady with the Lapdog" and how Nabokov praises Chekhov's use of one "item" to evoke "the sensation of being in a provincial Russian hotel of the late nineteenth century" (67). To take Wachtel's example in a slightly different direction, not only does this item represent Chekhov's unique voice, it takes Gurov's passion, his inchoate love for a married woman, and situates it firmly in a place that is temporal and physical, not merely a state of mind. Even though Gurov is in the grips of love, he still must look at the inkstand with the picture of a faded horseman on it. Just like Gurov, we want to grab hold of something we know to be "real." Again, it's all in the details.

Feeling It

Doyle "Texas Dolly" Brunson is probably the greatest and most influential poker player living. Perhaps you have seen him on television, his cowboy hat pulled low over his jowly, impenetrable face. It is a face that resembles a Galapagos turtle's—he has seen a lot in his days. He also moves slowly, deliberately, like a turtle.

Ultimately, along with a few other individuals, Brunson is responsible for the current popularity of the game because he was the first person to write down how he successfully made millions of dollars playing poker. The book is called *Super System: A Course in Power Poker.* But lest you think from this title that it is a simple how-to manual of the kind you see populating Barnes & Noble remainder sections, here is a particularly relevant example of Brunson's "teachings":

> Whenever I use the word "feel" . . . you should understand it's not some extra-sensory power that I have. [. . .] You build up a history of every player you ever played with . . . I mean everyone you've ever done any serious gambling with. You've got some type of information on them. It's there . . . buried in your mind. . . . When the time comes to use it, it'll come naturally—you won't have to force it. (431)

Brunson is attributing his particular success in poker to the power of recall, the ability to use the knowledge of the hundreds of thousands of hands he has played over the years and bring it to bear on a particular problem he is facing. The knowledge will help him know how to proceed in the hand. In the book, Brunson offers very few "rules." Pay attention is really the only one unassailable law. Usually, he just presents situations and problems and how he or others reacted. The fact that Brunson talks so much about "feel" can be off-putting to a person looking for a

magical guidebook—how to become a poker millionaire in ten easy steps. What he advocating is hard work. What he is advocating is cataloging every hand you have ever played. What he is advocating is taking experience and transforming it into knowledge.

All of what Brunson has to say seems remarkably similar to John Gardner's cautions in *The Art of Fiction*: "there are [. . .] a great many things every serious writer needs to think about; but there are no rules" (8). On the next page, Gardner goes on to discuss "the writer's absolute trust (not blind faith) in his own intelligence and sensitivity—his ability to perceive and understand the world around him—and partly in his experience as a craftsman; that is [. . .] his knowledge, drawn from long experience, of what will work and what will not" (9). So writing is about craft, but it also requires something that may initially seem ineffable to someone who doesn't give much thought to the particular problems a writer must wrestle with when he begins his work. In effect, Gardner is talking about the way any writer transmutes his every day experiences, his memories and observations, into something entirely different—characters and the world they inhabit.

Once in a college Spanish class, my professor, who was in a wheel chair, made a comment that registered with me, though it had nothing to do with any assignment or matter of pronunciation. "You know," he said, "I really love the Florida Keys. It's just so . . . flat down there." That was it. He then moved on to other things. But his odd digression stuck in my mind. Years later I was writing a story about an alcoholic who was also wheel chair bound. Suddenly my professor's appreciation of the Keys made complete sense. His world was a struggle; being in that chair hindered him in so many small and large ways. It was nice to think of a place with no hills, a place that he could get around in easily. I realized my character had the same desire. He had encountered a series of obstacles, most of them self-imposed, and he naively desired to find

a landscape he could traverse with no such barriers. The central conflict of the story then became whether he could accept and deal with those barriers. So what does this have to do with Texas Dolly and John Gardner? Simple. I'm just acknowledging how right they are. Everything matters. Everything you know must be there available and culled through if you are to discover what your story is about.

Heroes or How to Be Your Own Man

Another commercial. In this one, twenty-two year old internet phenom Tom Dwan sits down at a table and looks in a mirror. "When I first started out," he says, "I tried to play like my idols." Then he gazes into the mirror and several established players appear, one by one before him. Dwan emulates them—he teepees hands in front of his mouth like Chris Ferguson, he stares intently like Phil Ivey—until finally a chip is thrown out of the mirror. He catches the chip, gets up from the table, and concludes, "Then I learned to play like me." Heroes, predecessors. We idolize them; we learn from them; we argue with them; finally, we attempt to slough them off.

Harold Bloom has spent two rather long-winded books making these same points about writers. Every true writer must deal with his predecessors. He starts there, and eventually writes himself over and through his heroes. They haunt and inform his work, but, eventually, if he is to be his own man, he begins to push back, to question that rich heritage. Obviously, this is where a writer begins. Writers are not born wholly formed; at first, they are simply readers, enchanted by some vision that has been set before them.

So, where did I begin? Oddly enough, it was Thomas Wolfe who grabbed me by the throat. Under Wolfe's influence I wrote long, portentous, lyrical sentences that spoke of some current which seemed to run underneath all life. Were there characters, actual plot or

happenings? Not really. I had some vague "feelings" at that time, but I struggled to connect them with the real life that was going on all around me. Ultimately, this influence was deadly poison which I had to clean out of my system. The stories of Ernest Hemingway and Ray Carver served as the purgative. Yes, some initial heroes operate like blockages; they won't let you progress. They stifle you, make you sick, bottle up your voice.

I saw honesty in those spare, deceptively simple sentences in the best of Hemingway's work. Hemingway taught me to focus on the situation, to expose the surface so thoroughly that it shines. Then the interior will emerge. This is the basic principle of writing he is elucidating when he refers to a story as an iceberg. However, I think Carver, another disciple, put it better:

> What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things. (92)

Any kind of story worth its salt involves conflict, within the self, or with some external force. There is something "unsettled" which is at issue. For me, finding this fault line comes through describing a scene, the characters' actions and words as accurately as possible. The conflict cannot be a general one; it cannot only be a philosophical idea. Instead, this conflict which ripples "the smooth [. . .] surface of things" must be specific to the character and his intimate surroundings. Only then can it transcend the boundaries of the story. For instance, in "Big Two-Hearted River" Nick wants to match himself against the landscape, the river and the fish he has come to catch. Yet, he has also come to re-configure an image of himself shattered by his experiences in the war. As the story progresses, Nick fights to control the "river" of images and thoughts that threaten to overtake him as he seeks to maintain balance. None of this, of course, is

directly discussed by the narrator. The narration, though, suggests this internal conflict through descriptions of the relentlessly physical. The motion of the fish holding themselves "steady" as Nick observes them; the grasshoppers that are sluggish in the early morning dew as Nick collects them and puts them in a stoppered bottle; the drawn out scene in which Nick partakes in a meal purely for the enjoyment of it. All these moments lead us to the show down with the big trout. Nick has tried to maintain his balance, but ultimately must confront the emotions that can possibly overthrow him.

In "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" two waiters have a conversation about an old drunk who is keeping them from closing. The older waiter ultimately identifies with the sad, but dignified figure. He argues with the younger waiter to give him his time. The narrator carefully catalogues the saucers stacked upon the old man's table, the half-peseta left as a tip. These are the markers of a debt paid, but also of emptiness. The fault line of the story is then revealed as the older waiter finishes cleaning up the café for the night. It is not about the difference between youth and age, as the conversation between the impatient young waiter and the more indulgent older one might suggest. It is about the struggle against "nada," the hollowness that can invade the soul and can only be combated by small kindnesses or pleasures. But first we must have the tottering pile of saucers; first we must wipe the counters.

Still, what would "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" be without the last digression into the older man's thoughts, his mocking prayer? Perhaps not a story at all. Hemingway breaks his own rules here and for the right reason. Sometimes you have to tell rather than show. This is where my argument with Hemingway has taken shape. His effaced narration, which excludes most, if not all of his characters' inner lives, often leaves us wanting more.[2] When Hemingway rather grandiosely puffs in *Death in the Afternoon*, "If a writer of prose knows enough [. . .] he may

omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer stated them" (192), it all sounds very good, very right. As a young writer I found this idea unconsciously appealing because it let me off the hook in some ways. I could leave out vital components of a story because they were "implied." Or at least that was the idea. Most forget (and I think Hemingway often did himself later) that a few sentences after the above he points out that "A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing." In truth, sometimes you have to write more, not less. Something always seemed lacking in my early stories. I did not include everything that needed to be known about the characters, their thoughts. Or, worse yet, I didn't even know it myself. There were "hollow places."

Now I feel I know more about my characters when I write; therefore, more advanced techniques are required of me to disseminate the entirety of the story. Sometimes I must butt heads with the established order. In my story "Objects Awaiting Motion," the narrator is concerned almost exclusively with the thoughts of the main character, Les, a man who is gradually moving towards the decision to kill himself. Dutiful to the notion of implication, I never mention the word "suicide," nor do I discuss what might be bothering Les; something is wrong with him, but what it is remains somewhat cloudy (though the careful reader should form some hypotheses). At the end of the story, however, I felt it necessary to abruptly shift the focus from Les to his wife and kids. I wanted to show the results of his decision; the characters share our bafflement as to why he did it (sorry, no suicide note my friends), but their pain does not revolve around the possible conundrum of motivation, but the visceral feeling of loss and betrayal. I wanted to illustrate several different perspectives here, to conjure up a lot of emotion, and I obviously couldn't do this by simply staying with Les, or remaining, as a narrator,

uninvolved. The shift does perhaps shake a reader out of the initial "dream," but it quickly re-orients her in another place, one which is informed but also somewhat cut off from all that has come beforehand in the story. It makes us aware that several worlds are crashing down here.

As I have matured as a writer, I have become drawn to the flexibility of third- person. Wayne Booth and his conception of the "implied author" helped me see the third-person narrator as a distinct character, one with view points and agendas. In his excellent essay "In Defense of Omniscience," Richard Russo posits, "Omniscience allows the writer to know more and reveal more" (11). He goes on to show how much information and how many observations an omniscient narrator is capable of elucidating. The voice itself is adaptable and not in the least generic. Finally, Russo makes a bold, almost antagonistic comment: "We aren't writers to be timid. If playing God scares you, there are other professions" (16). Playing God can be intimidating, but that is ultimately what writers do. We create worlds and populate them with people, making them out of the dust of our imagination like a legion of Adams and Eves. But most writers must also have models for these people; we must pay close attention, catalog, and collect. Let's make a final trip back to the Brass Rail.

Pay Attention

The Rail had its own cast of characters and I got to know them over time. I noticed the elderly Jewish couple who sweetly doted on one another on breaks, but never played together at the same table if they could help it; they didn't want to bust the other out. If they called your bet, you knew you better have a hand. They were, in poker terminology, so tight they squeaked. On the opposite spectrum, you had the adrenaline junkie who loved action, who loved to make wild bets, who never met a draw he didn't chase. The next turn of the card brought either elation or

severe disappointment. There were many of these guys (and they were always guys), but one in particular drank Red Bulls continuously because he was just coming off a long shift at some factory. When he smiled, you could see he had a roan tooth, colored the dirty yellow of the cigarette ends which littered the ground outside the Rail at the close of the night. This kind required careful study; they could knock you out or double you up in a heart beat.

They ran the gamut in temperament, but also education and social status. The sharply dressed law student who always smelled of some expensive cologne sat at the same table as the meth-head, her hair unwashed for days, her t-shirt stained with unsettling smudges of candy-apple red (*maybe* it was just finger nail polish). There were also drug dealers and gang bangers. These were guys who might scare you in another setting, but here you were on equal footing. They might even learn to respect and fear *you*, if you consistently outplayed them.

There were the poker geeks, the guys who knew all the odds, who could run calculations in their heads as to whether or not they should call or fold with their flush draw on the Turn. One guy worked for an aero-space firm. He had a PhD in some math heavy field. He was easy to beat because he was always going to make the "correct" play. He never made a decision that was irrational or tricky.

Most people were just there to pass the time. They were neither good nor bad players, just a bit indifferent. If they did well that was nice, but ultimately they didn't put much thought into the game. They didn't carefully study someone before making a call or fold. They just looked at their cards and decided if they liked them or not. All the while, though, I studied them, made lists of their tells and tendencies, knew whom I could bluff and who was un-bluffable (these people are termed "calling stations" or "cally wallys"), who liked to play ace-rag or suited connectors, who always had a hand if he made a big re-raise, and who liked to posture from position.[3]

I also listened to their stories. They talked about difficult children and told filthy jokes (the lesbian who drove a taxi told the filthiest ones). They talked about their jobs, their love lives. They all had their reasons for being there. If I could figure these reasons out, then I could more easily read them. “Reading” a player is a pretty commonly used term in poker circles. Some pros can so accurately “read” another player that they can predict the cards he will flip over.

At some point, most writers are asked, “How did you make up all those people? How did you know what they would think?” My answer is simple: “I was listening. I was paying attention.”

CHAPTER 2:

SAMARITAN

The boy started walking before dawn. He was used to getting up early, before six usually, to walk to a worksite more than five miles from where he was staying. Today he was walking farther—thirty miles, he figured—but he'd done it before.

As he left, he pondered the ash gray single-wide that had been his home for the last half year. It was not the nicest or the worst place he'd stayed, but at least he was on his own with no one stumbling over him at four in the morning or some dog yapping in his ear.

He spat in the direction of Hawkins's house and walked up the rutted road. The old man could go to hell. The boy pictured Hawkins's spavined face and the spindly fingers stained the awful yellow of an old bruise. Every one for himself, he thought. Why didn't he know that by now?

A few rays of sunlight penetrated a stand of scraggly pines. The beams glistened on dew that clung to the barbed wire fence running down one side of the road. For a moment, the dew looked like droplets of pure fire. The earth reeked of wet hay and weeds. Some cows lowed softly as he passed, and a skein of mist rose around them as they solemnly ate their breakfast. He imagined this was what a soul departing the body looked like and laughed, thinking about cow souls.

He would miss this place, the quiet, the long evenings of solitude, though he wouldn't miss the work—framing houses was dirty, sweaty work and he was paid under the table like a Mexican.

The boy thought about calling Uncle Johnny when he passed the Stop-a-Minute, but he couldn't really spare a dollar and he wasn't sure if he remembered the number anyway. It would just have to be a surprise.

At about 10 o'clock, it began to heat up. He took off his shirt and tied it around his waist. Hwy 22 stretched in front of him into a blurry sun. A man outside the Stop-a-Minute had given him vague directions on how to get to Quentin, and he was beginning to wonder if he had missed the road. He sat down in the grass and rested for a few minutes. He closed his eyes, leaned back, and listened to the cars and semis rumble past him. Hitchhiking was a possibility, but he'd had some bad experiences: a creepy old man who had put his hand on his leg and grinned at him in a sad, unnerving way, and in the opposite extreme, a preacher who didn't get his fill of preaching on Sunday. So he decided to keep on walking, even if it took until nightfall to get there.

In the distance, he saw a white delivery truck coming toward him. He stood up and waved at the driver and, miraculously, the truck pulled over to the side of the highway. The driver slid open the door

"Listen, I was goin to Quentin, and I was wonderin where I turn?"

The man got out of the truck and stood beside the boy. He was tall and slim and had a young face. He seemed to ponder the question deeply before answering. "When you get to a place called the Hotspot, you turn right on Hwy 251 and just keep going. It's pretty much a straight shot."

"I thank you."

"It's a pretty far ways, though." The driver looked at him in kindness or puzzlement.

"All right," the boy said and started walking.

"Good luck."

He heard the truck start, but didn't watch it pull away.

The Hotspot was one of those places where travelers converge. Some Mexican road workers sat in a knot laughing and eating pizza beside a man who wore a suit and tie and had his finger stuck in his ear as he talked on a cell phone. It was a vision to the boy. He'd been walking for six hours. He wandered around the store, and the air conditioning cooled his already reddening skin. He could see white splotches forming on his shoulders.

There was a ten dollar bill in his pocket, and he figured he could spend about three or four on lunch and a drink. Finally, he bought a hot dog and a liter bottle of lemonade for 2.85. He was pleased with his thrift. As the cashier rang up his purchase, he pondered the Dale Earnhardt key chains and the other trinkets piled on the counter.

"You look like you been out in the sun."

"Yep."

"Shoulda worn some sun screen," she said and smiled.

"Thank you." The boy took his bag and didn't look at her. The last thing he needed was another momma.

After he ate lunch, he felt slightly better, but the heat sickness still made his head buzz. For a few minutes, he sat and watched the cars pull in and out. A family in a mini-van pulled in to get gas. They looked like they were going to the beach. The father and his son came into the

store. The man was handsome and wore mirrored sun glasses, the kind some fighter pilot wore in a movie the boy had watched.

"Go on to the bathroom," the father instructed his son, who was maybe ten. "We're not stopping again." The man paid for the gas and waved at his wife, who stood beside the van stretching like an aerobics instructor. Then the boy noticed the girl, blond and lithe. She wore hip huggers and he could see everything as she leaned over to press the buttons at the pump. The boy thought about tracing his hand along the tensed underside of her thigh. That moment before you reach the heat.

The son came out of the bathroom, and the father put his arm around his shoulder. "You ready, buddy?" Then they were gone. The boy began to think about something, an old shard of a memory, something that sticks you when you don't expect it. Papa Ray jumping out of the boat into the lake. Leaning back and floating like a self-satisfied walrus, the sun glittering on his fat pale stomach. The puckered bypass scar looked exactly like a zipper's track. He remembered how it felt, cold and smooth. He could not see himself, but he could hear Papa Ray laughing. "Throw me one of them beers, boy. This here is the life, ain't it?" The green lake stretched out around them, and it seemed it was only them in the world then, that no one else would dare intrude.

AD Lutz thought about the boy all day. He delivered a newspaper called *The Trading Post* to convenience stores all over two counties. It was not a hard job, but AD was growing tired of it—the driving, the monotony. He had a college degree; he knew he should be doing something more with his life. But the boy stuck in AD's mind. He was something different, an oddity. What was his story? Kicked out, AD thought. He imagined the scene. A fat woman in a

floral moo moo cursing the boy, a cigarette hanging from her lip. The emphysema cough. The boy defiant, hurling “Fuck you” at her as he slammed the door. Too cliché, but then how else do these things go?

AD had his route down to a science; he could make the turns blindfolded now after two years. Sometimes he wondered how he had ended up at this point, living by rote, connecting one day to the next with only the expectation of air conditioning, a beer, and something tolerable on cable.

At 5 o’clock AD left his last stop in Bolton, an Exxon station on Green St., and headed up Hwy 251. He hummed a song to himself which he didn’t recognize. Perhaps he’d made it up. Maybe he’d sit down with his guitar later and try to pick it out. He hadn’t written a song in a long while. Just then, he passed the boy. He was sitting in a ditch, a bottle tilted to his mouth. AD stopped the truck, got out, and waved at the boy, who grabbed his bag and started to run raggedly towards the truck.

“I’m not supposed to do this but what the hell,” said AD.

The boy got in without saying anything.

“I saw you this morning. You asked me directions.”

The boy nodded. “I ‘preciate the ride.”

AD started up the truck and they drove in silence for a few minutes. He had to restrain himself from asking “What’s the story?” though he somehow felt it was due him. “My name’s Andy Lutz, by the way. People call me AD. Short for Andrew Davis.”

The boy didn’t offer his name.

“You in school?”

“Went for awhile. Been dropped out now for a few years.”

"You should stick with it. You can't get far without an education."

The boy nodded as if he were considering the profundity of AD's words. Then he unscrewed the cap on his lemonade and took a swig.

"You got some place to stay?"

"My uncle, if he'll have me. I figure I'll remember how to get there if I can get to the Civic Center." The boy seemed implacable. "Just a while back I seen a truck run over a turtle. It made a sound like a gunshot. Pow." The boy pointed his thumb and index finger at AD and grinned.

"My grandfather caught snapping turtles," AD said. "Made soup out of them. Kept them chained up in this little poolroom he made. Once when I was about seven or eight, I opened the door to go in a take a piss, and there were these two gigantic turtles hissing at me. I swear they were straining on the chains to get at me. It scared me to death. I went out and peed in the pool."

"I'd of liked to seen that. I never run across a snapping turtle before."

"You're lucky. They're mean as hell. Grandaddy had scars all over his hands from dealing with them."

"Herpetology is what I'd like to study, though," the boy said.

"What's that?" AD was amazed at the Latinate word.

"Snakes, you know. Studying them. I'll go out into the woods and catch them. I'm not afraid. Been to the hospital three times. Once, my hand got so big, it felt like I was wearing a baseball glove."

"You got work in Quentin?"

"Naw. I figure I'll go back to the Burger King where I worked before. Any monkey can do that job." The boy smiled then, and AD could see the condition of his teeth. They were brown and splayed like a busted picket fence.

"I'd a been walking for awhile yet," the boy remarked.

"Yes."

Evening was coming on. The sky turned a seashell pink. They drove past pasture land and the boy stared at some llamas in a field. "Your mama's a llama," he said.

"What's that?"

"Nothing," the boy said. "Just something from some book my Papa would read me."

"Will he let you stay, your uncle?" AD was filled with an overwhelming hope that things would turn out all right for the boy.

"I reckon," the boy said. "Unless he turns on me." The boy's mood seemed to darken and he gazed out the window, watching the shadow play in the trees.

"All right," AD said. "There's a gas station up here. You can call your Uncle from the pay phone, right? Get your Uncle to come get you. I can't take you all the way into town or someone might see you and I could get in trouble, you know." He smiled sheepishly.

"Sure."

The moment was slipping away from AD. He felt the need to do something for the boy, to impart some wisdom to him. "Go back to school. It's important."

The boy nodded. He stepped out of the truck. "Thanks for the ride."

AD felt the desperate pull again, the need to do something significant. "What's your name?"

"Robbie. Robbie Alewine."

"Hold on," AD said. "I live on Williams Street behind the big church. This is my phone number." He hurriedly wrote down the number on the corner of an invoice and handed it to the boy. "You need money? I've got fourteen dollars."

The boy shook his head.

"You call me if things don't work out."

"All right."

Then it was over. AD watched the boy in his mirror as he drove off. The boy stood beside the phone booth a moment then started to walk down the road. He took long, plodding strides. Then AD rounded the bend and the boy was out of sight. He exhaled quickly from his nose and wanted a cigarette for the first time in years.

CHAPTER 3:

WALKING POINT

The Richton County Sheriff's office called looking for Ricky. He was in trouble again for passing some bad checks at a grocery store. I told them I didn't know his whereabouts any more than they did. Then I told them that I'd let them know if I saw him, which was a lie.

I should have known that it wouldn't last, but every time I hoped he might straighten himself out. The only thing I could do was wait. Pretty soon he'd run out of whatever money he had scrounged and then he would come crying. I didn't tell Linda anything because she was tired of dealing with the situation and wanted me to cut him off for good.

I was on edge waiting for the call. I dreaded to hear the phone ring, because I knew we'd be starting all over again, and my hope was wearing thin. But I wanted the call more than I didn't.

After a week, I felt like I had to do something, so I went over to Richton looking for him, but of course he wasn't at his old apartment. The landlord said Ricky stopped paying rent three months ago. When he went to check on the place, there was only a mattress on the floor and a few folding chairs. The carpet was a landscape of cigarette burns and blood spatters, as though someone had a violent quarrel with the decor.

"Nothing you can do about that," he said. "Just have to replace the carpet, you know." Then he looked at me for a minute. "That's your brother? I feel for you. My cousin got into this junk. Bad stuff, crack. We never heard from him again. He could be dead for all I know." I

looked at him. He said, “Sorry,” then paused. “About that back rent and the damages. I got to make a living, you know.”

“I’ll send a check,” I said, resisting the urge to hit him.

“You’re a good brother,” he said. “He’s lucky he’s got you.”

A few days later at dinnertime, the phone rang. Linda answered and handed it over after making a face at me. She shook her head no, but I ignored her.

“Hey Ricky,” I said. “Long time no see.”

“I’ve been busy,” he said and coughed, then went on to say that his car was broken down and he just needed a loaner, a couple of hundred. “It’s worse than a fucking Yugo. Where did you get that piece of crap, anyway?”

“You were happy to have it at the time,” I said and turned my back on Linda.

“Is that Uncle Ricky?” Sandy, my youngest, asked.

“Let’s cut the shit, Ricky. What is it this time?”

“Come on, Sam. Have a heart. I’m just down on my luck that’s all.”

“Don’t give him a dime,” Linda hissed.

“Is it cocaine again, or are you diversifying?”

“I don’t need this from you,” he said.

“You called me.”

“Shit, Sam, shit. What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry for being such a fuckhead?”

I lowered my voice. “I want to help, Ricky. Honest to God. Let me come get you. Just tell me where you are.”

"Not rehab again."

"No, I swear. No judgment. I just want to talk."

There was a long silence and then he told me to meet him the next day at Mansour's Liquor Emporium. "I'm pretty damn tired of all this," he said.

When I got off the phone, Linda looked like she wanted to get into it, but I just held my hand up and said, "Don't." I went into the den and turned on the T.V. We had just gotten a satellite dish, the first in the neighborhood, and I could spend all night flipping through the channels. I didn't want to think about Ricky, but I couldn't pay attention to the television, either. Finally, I came across this show about Vietnam on The History Channel. I never watched shows about the war, didn't go see *Platoon* when it came out, but tonight I watched. They showed some footage of some soldiers torching a village. I'd seen that before. The bright bloom of heat in your face, then the smoke, and finally the wailing. The language of grief, but foreign just the same. It was all just jibber-jabber at the time. Then they showed Lt.Calley walking into court so young and scared and proud. The look on his face said, "You can't possibly know what I know, you fuckers." And maybe he was right.

In country, I walked point. The guys all liked me there, because I wouldn't get nervous and start shooting at squirrels like some did. You were fifty paces ahead of the platoon, but it felt like you were alone in the world. I pulled it all inside me. The only thing to do was to get cold, focus on the task at hand, and make it out alive. The show brought back all the memories, the places I didn't ever want to visit again.

Linda and Sandy were talking in the kitchen, but I didn't try to make out what they were saying. The show was over. I started to flip through the channels again. I thought about Daddy and how it never seemed as though he enjoyed watching T.V. even though he was in that chair

constantly. It was like he was doing penance. The last month of his life, he made the nurses leave the television on 24 hours a day. He watched cartoons, soap operas—it didn't matter as long as there was something there to drown out all those voices I imagine he was hearing, all those people he had let down.

"You'll look after him," he said to me a few weeks before he died. "The others aren't worth a damn. They're selfish." He coughed out some more of the black that filled his lungs. "I know you'll watch him, keep him straight."

At the time, Ricky was laying brick on a job where I had done a little engineering work. I pulled some strings, but Ricky was doing good, showing up every day and keeping out of trouble.

"I guess you might call Ricky a mistake," Daddy said, and it was like he couldn't stop himself. He hadn't hardly said a word to anyone in months. "Your momma was pretty far gone by then, but a man has needs. You know, when it was time for Ricky to come, I found her sitting on the john. I guess she thought she had to shit, that's all." I thought about Momma and her ash covered housecoat and how you could sometimes see her eyes change and then there was some other person talking to you. When Ricky was a baby, she once put a metal pot on the hot stove eye and tried to bathe him in it. When his skin touched the bottom, he started to wail. I came running from the back of the house. Daddy was out somewhere as he usually was. "What's he crying about, now?" she said. "I was just trying to give him a bath. Why's he always crying?"

"She was such a good-lookin woman, even then," Daddy said. "You understand that, don't you?" He laughed and then started coughing again. I looked out the window onto the backside of the hospital. Some pigeons roosted on the window ledge, and I closed my eyes and listened to them coo as my father coughed some more.

About a year after I got home from Vietnam, Ricky got in real trouble for the first time. We were living in a trailer park and I was working on my degree at the university. Susan, my oldest, was on the way, but I didn't know it yet. The family always thought that Ricky was just the wild one and laughed it off when the patrolman brought him home drunk after causing trouble out at Fatboy's or some other little juke. "Sowin them wild oats," Daddy said. The Sheriff and Daddy had an arrangement because Daddy did some side work for him from time to time, and Ricky was the star linebacker on one of the best teams Piedmont had ever had.

Then A&M got wind of Ricky's off the field activities and decided to withdraw its scholarship offer. Daddy was unforgiving after that and kicked him out of the house. Ricky was gone for days on a bender. Daddy sat in his chair watching T.V. and glaring at the screen as if he disapproved of every word the actors said. "I'm not lettin him back. The boy's got to learn."

Finally, I went out and found Ricky. He was way out in the woods in a hunting lodge run by Leon Smith. When I got there, Leon was in the yard splitting wood. He looked up at me from his work. His fine black hair hung down to his waist. I had heard he was a chief, but his tribe was long gone now.

"In the cabin," he said. "Been dead drunk since he got here." He must have seen the way I looked at him. "I didn't give him any. He brought it with him."

Light gathered in the pines. Mist from the river covered my feet. Leon leaned on his axe and just looked at me. "Come on and have some coffee," he said. "I'll fix scrambled eggs. Eat something, then we'll worry about your brother."

I nodded okay. I was too worn out to argue. We went inside where Ricky was passed out in a chair.

"I've seen him play football," Leon said. "He's fast and strong, but has no discipline. Over pursues and gets himself out of position. But you played football, so you know."

"Maybe. Ricky's two times the player I was."

Leon poured me a cup of coffee. He didn't offer any sugar or cream. I drank it too fast, but the heat felt good in my stomach.

"I saw you play, too."

"I didn't know you were such a fan, Leon."

He ignored me and went on. "You were playing Palmetto, I think, and the quarterback was rolling out, looking to run. Now you could have gone for him, the big hit. But you watched his eyes and saw him looking at the receiver behind you. You dropped back into coverage just as he threw it. Interception. Your brother never would have made that play."

Leon got up and began to cook the eggs. Ricky started to snore. I looked at him and almost saw the future. The reckless pursuit.

"What are you going to do?" Linda said the next morning when she woke up and saw me getting dressed.

"I'm going to get him."

"You don't even know where he is."

I didn't say anything, just tucked a K-bar knife in the waist of my jeans.

"This is stupid." She sat up in bed. "He's a grown man. Let him go. You've already done more than anyone else would. What about Bobbie? Why don't you call him and get him to waste his Saturday looking in homeless shelters and crack houses?"

"It doesn't work like that," I said.

"Yes, the deathbed promise."

"I don't have time for this." I turned to leave.

"You never listen to me anyway. You'll do just what you want. I don't know why I even bother."

It was winter, but in Judson the old black men still sat in chairs on the sidewalk passing the bottle, laughing and telling stories. The sky was leaden; their breath rose like wood smoke. I was in the parking lot of Mansour's Liquor Emporium. I watched the parade of sad, creased men and women go into the store and buy their Thunderbird or Crazy Horse. There was never any dawdling or looking around. They knew what they wanted. I waited an hour and Ricky still hadn't shown up.

Finally, I decided to go in and ask if the owner had seen Ricky. I knew Ricky still had to have a drink even if he was on harder stuff. I had a picture of him that I kept in my wallet. We were standing beside a grill at my house drinking beers. The picture was seven or eight years old. At the time, Ricky was on a health kick. He was trying to get back in shape so he could try out for a semi-professional team that was starting in Richton. His muscles bulged and I looked soft beside him, every bit the middle-aged engineer. For a moment, I tried to remember that night—what we were grilling, some joke Ricky told, what music was playing—but the memory was too gray. I had been careless with my time with him. I hadn't seen him in nearly a year.

The man behind the counter noticed me when I came in, seemed to scrutinize my clothes for a minute, then looked away. I stared at a display of Captain Jack's Rum and tried to pull myself together. The picture was in my hand. I picked up a bottle of Boone's and put it on the counter.

"Listen," I said holding up the picture. "This guy, I wanted to know if you had seen him. He's my brother." He took the picture and looked at it for a minute.

"Seen someone who resemble him. Skinnier, though."

"You have any idea where he might be?"

"Not really." He paused. " 'Cept I seen him with Glenda White a few times. She stay on Smythe street, but I'm not sure what house. She drive a VW bug."

I paid the man and thanked him for his help. "Good luck," he said. "I hope you find him. Be careful. This ain't the nicest neighborhood for a white gentleman to be walking around, in case you hadn't noticed." My hand patted the knife. A shuffling old drunk passed me as I was going to the car.

"Hey man," he said. "Can you spare some change for a brother?" His teeth were yellow and thick as horse's teeth.

"Here," I said, giving him the bottle of Boone's. "Knock yourself out."

He pulled it out of the bag and looked at it. "Not my brand." He began to navigate slowly back down the street.

By the time I graduated from high school, I couldn't wait to get out from under my father and his sharp tongue. I never had any idea I was smart, so I didn't even think about college. I moved in with my buddy Leaphardt and worked at the mill for a few years. Sometimes I'd go take Momma, Daddy, and Ricky out to Sunday dinner at the Country Kettle, but Momma didn't like people looking at her and half the time we'd just have to get up and go on back home. Daddy would smoke his cigarettes on the porch and ask me why any son of his couldn't figure

out how to fit a joist together and had to disgrace the family by working in a peon position hauling spools of cotton. “Just grunt work,” he said.

By then Vietnam was starting up, and it seemed like as good an opportunity as any other. After I signed the enlistment papers, I went back home and found Daddy in the kitchen drinking a beer. He looked up at me guiltily because it was mid-day, but I just opened the refrigerator and got one out, too. We sat there for a while, tasting the silence. I set the keys to my GTO on the table.

“Use it if you want,” I said. I had worked nights as a carhop down at Pete’s for two summers to earn the money to buy it, and I knew Daddy admired it, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

“So you’re goin,” he said.

“Yes. Basic at Fort Jackson.”

“Don’t get killed,” he said and that was it. I tried to say goodbye to Momma, but she was particularly bad that day and wouldn’t let me touch her. She just shook her head and walked away muttering under her breath.

Ricky was the last person I saw. At fourteen he was already bigger than me, and when he hugged me some of the air went out of my lungs. He was like a bear that didn’t know his own strength. As we drove away, I looked back, suddenly aware that I was leaving him there, defenseless. We were near the crest of the rutted road that led to the highway, and the sun was slanted at an angle so I couldn’t make out Ricky. He was just a blur far below. I thought he was waving.

Smythe Street was not far from Mansour’s Liquor Emporium. It was a short street, so I decided to park and simply wait for Ricky to show up. It wasn’t a good plan, but it was the best I

had. I sat in the car for four hours. I was tired. It was the longest day of my life. Finally, I saw him walking down the street. When he noticed me, he tried to run. It wasn't much of a contest. He slumped down on the curb, out of breath.

"You found me," he said tonelessly.

"It's what you wanted, right? That's why you called, isn't it?"

"I can't make it much longer." I sat down beside him. He leaned his head on my shoulder. He was crying.

"Where's your car?"

"I traded it."

"We'll get it back."

"I doubt it. Don't bother. What do I need with a car?"

"I'm going to get you better."

He laughed. "I've heard that before, said that before, haven't I?"

I was searching for something to say, but I was tired of homilies. "Let's go," I said.

As I drove with Ricky dozing in the backseat, I started to think about Vietnam again. A kid was walking point with me and Garick. The kid, I don't remember his name, was third in line and I felt his nervousness like a palpable presence. Garick whistled to me and came up to talk.

"This guy's going to get us killed. He's going to shoot us in the back if he hears a twig break. Let him go first. I'll bring up the rear."

We switched places and began to make our way down the path again. Just a few moments later, a lone VC came walking toward us, as though he were on his way home from church on a nice balmy, Sunday afternoon. He was strolling. He stopped when he saw us and just stood there. The kid froze, too. He was shaking all over. I figured I was going to die. Then the VC turned and

ran. It's funny. I shot thousands of rounds in Vietnam, but I never knew if one of them killed anybody. Probably I did, but I never really knew. That suited me. If I had been in front, I would have shot the man without thinking. Pure instinct would have pulled the trigger. I don't know how I would have handled that.

We checked into a Red Roof Inn off Hwy 55. It seemed far enough away from any of Ricky's old haunts to give him second thoughts about walking. I told the guy at the desk not to call a cab or charge anything to my credit card except food.

"I'll bring you some clothes tomorrow," I said as I watched Ricky get undressed in the bathroom. He smelled like sweat and grease and something else, like moldy oranges, a sickly sweet odor that seemed to breathe through his skin. He didn't say much. Now he seemed almost catatonic. The steam from the shower fogged the mirror.

"You saved me again," he said.

"I was a little bit late, Ricky. I'm sorry about that." He tried to smile then, but his face had a clownish quality, like the ones with the painted on frowns and the tear drop hanging from the corner of an eye. He held up his hand. His fingers were crossed.

"This time."

When I got home, I called the Sheriff's office and told them where Ricky was. The man on the other end said that he'd probably do time. I hung up the phone. Linda was asleep on the couch in her nurse's uniform. The eleven o'clock news was just ending. I turned off the T.V. and Linda woke up.

"Well," she said. "Should I even ask? Do you want to talk about it?"

"I didn't give him any money," I said.

She got up and put her arm around my waist. “You look tired.”

“Yes, I am,” I said. We walked back to the bedroom. Sandy’s door was cracked and I could hear her soft, easy breathing. I tried to sleep.

CHAPTER 4:

THE KEYS

"How can you drink that stuff in the morning?" Jim asked as I poured a shot of Jack Daniels from my flask into the coffee.

"You never heard of Irish coffee?"

"All the Irish are a bunch of drunks," he said with his mouth full of sausage biscuit. "And that's not Irish coffee. That's just sad."

I looked around at the other members of our group. I didn't know anyone else, except for Jim. Some dumbass shrink had the idea to form a support group for debilitated people in the Beaverdam area. And, unfortunately, I'm pretty much required to come every other week, unless I want more of these bleeding hearts coming around, saying they just want to help me out. Really they want to tell you what to do like any other boss.

We meet on Sunday in the Hardees on Main Street. It really bothers the church people to see us here when they come in all dressed up and full of God. Sometimes I wanted to say, "Come on," and let them feel the indentions on my head where they drilled the holes for the halo. Or maybe they could just scoot around in my chair all day and see how fun that is.

"Rita gave me a call the other night."

"What did she want?" Jim was suspicious of all women after the way his wife Kathy did him, but he still loved her. You could tell.

"Nothing, I guess. She'd heard rumors I was drinking too much."

"You do. That's not a secret."

"It's just that I'm such a naturally bubbly person. I need a little depressant to keep me from being too positive about my current state of being."

"That's what we're here for, Byron," said some legless guy with a beard. "To talk about our problems."

"Thanks, Grizzly Adams." The guy started to say something, but then put his head down and picked at his hash browns. I proceeded to hold court. "Don't give me all this touchy feely bullshit. All the talking in the world's not giving us our legs back. I'm not being bitter about it. I'm just being honest. Isn't that what Doc Freud is always telling us—be honest about our limitations?"

"I think you're missing Dr. Van Bramer's point." Bearded guy was getting a little feisty.

"You know, I think I was wrong calling you Grizzly Adams. You remind me more of Kenny Rogers, now that I think about it. You seen how big that guy has gotten recently? Lay off the gravy, man."

"I give up. You're hopeless, Byron. If you want to wallow, wallow."

"I do. It's one of my few talents. I wallow better than a walrus." The conversation was getting old. This guy was too easy.

"Listen, Jimbo. You ever been to the Keys?"

Jim shook his head.

"It's a beautiful place. Palm trees all over. Warm but not too hot. That Hemingway guy had it right. Here's the kicker, though: it's flat. Perfectly flat. You could roll for miles and not one damn hill. If I could only get back to the Keys some day. Me and you need to take a trip this summer. What do you say?"

"My wife lives in Orlando now," Jim said.

"You mean your ex-wife."

"Yeah, my ex-wife."

"Just get over it," I said. "The past is the past."

That Friday, I was ensconced in my usual spot at the end of the bar of the Town & Country Lounge, and who comes walking in but Rita. She's the last person I expected to see, considering that she took my boy and is shacking up with some dude in Richton.

Everyone stopped and looked at Rita as she walked over to where I was down by the jukebox. The Town & Country is a place where men take their drinking seriously, and it doesn't see too many women. Besides, Rita is still something to look at, a real force of nature. Red hair all done up, long legs, and black cowhide boots.

"Well, looky here. If it idn't little Miss Thang come slumming."

"I thought I'd find you here," she said and sat down on a stool beside me.

"You drinking?" I motioned to the bartender. "One double over here."

"Really, Byron. I'm not in the mood tonight."

"You sure we're talking about alcohol?" She shot me a look. "That's all right, honey. If you don't want it, I'll drink it. So what brings you to my neck of the woods anyway?"

"I was visiting Mama, and I thought I'd stop by and say hello and check on Jake, but you weren't there." She looked off down the bar. The clack of pool balls seemed to get louder.

"So knowing the alcoholic I am, you decided to check the nearest bar, right?" The bartender had to lean over to hand the whiskey down and I drank it off in one swig.

"Mama told me this is where you were hanging out."

"My, my. Word does get around."

"People are concerned about you, Byron. Really, that's all. How much have you had already tonight?"

I could see the concern and pity in her eyes and hated it. Just like I hated when the bartender had bent over just now with that apologetic smile or when people would run ahead and hold a door open. It felt just like that. "Almost enough," I said. "You still banging that egg-head accountant?"

"Robert is not an accountant. He's a stockbroker. Let's just not get into all this again."

"Whatever." I motioned to the bartender. Some idiot picked "Achy Breaky Heart" on the jukebox. "Jesus, didn't they play that song into the ground about a million years ago?" Rita wasn't laughing.

"Tell me seriously," she said, leaning toward me. "How are you doing?"

I still had the empty glass in my hand. The neon glare from the jukebox made Rita's hair look purple. "You want to know really?"

She nodded.

"Well, actually, I'm doing great. I don't work anymore. I can have a drink anytime I feel like it without you bitching at me. I eat pizza every night. It's great."

"The money's not going to last forever, you know." About a year ago my Daddy kicked off, leaving me with a nice check from the insurance company. Who knew the old man thought about anything beyond the next beer?

"It sure feels like it right now," I said. A guy walked by and gave Rita the once over like he was licking her with his eyes. "What the fuck you looking at?"

He just put up his hands and laughed. “Nothing, limpy. I’m just amazed at your good fortune.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Rita put her head down. “Please don’t start anything.”

“Yeah, all right. Look’s like you get the free pass tonight, chief.” The guy snickered a little and walked over to get a good laugh about it with his friends. I hated that, too, so I lit into Rita.

“Listen,” I said. “I’ve been working my ass off all my life at one shitty job after another, and now I got the chance to take it easy for a while, and you tell me I should be looking for a job? That I should be doing something with my life? Who’s going to hire me anyway? I’m a goddamn cripple, in case you forgot. What am I going to be, one of those retards at the Wal-Mart that says hello to everybody?”

“You’re still so mad. It doesn’t do you any good, you know.” She started to get restless like she was getting ready to go, but I didn’t want her to leave.

“You left because I can’t fuck anymore, didn’t you?”

“I left for a lot of reasons.”

“Is he good in bed?”

Rita stood up. “I’m not listening to this.” She looked down at me. “Byron, your place is a mess. Jake’s doghouse needs to be fixed—there’s holes in the roof. And take care of yourself. Please?” She touched my hand and walked out. I waved at her, but she didn’t turn around.

“Another whiskey,” I said.

The next day there was nothing on T.V. so I decided to take a visit to the hardware store and get some wood for Jake's doghouse. Earl, who knew me from the good old days, was surprised to see me. "What you up to there, Byron?"

"You know, doing a little fixer-upper."

"Well, it's good to see you up and around."

"Yeah, I'm trying to act normal." I bought some nails along two by fours and plywood. Earl said his son would carry it over in a little bit.

When I came into the yard, Jake was just lying there looking pathetic like he always does. I think Weimaraners are the saddest of dogs. Jake lifted his head to look at me coming, but he didn't bother to get up. A car hit him a few years ago and he has trouble with his shoulder now. Besides, he's getting up there. It wouldn't be long for old Jake.

"Look, Jake. I'm gonna fix this place right up."

Jake was only mildly interested. I went inside to find my toolbox. A pizza box got stuck in the spokes of my wheels as I tried to get through the den. The place really was a mess. There were too many beer cans and pizza boxes and clothes lying around for me to get anywhere easily. I felt disgusted. Taped to the refrigerator was the number Rita was staying at. I looked at it for a long time deciding whether I should call.

I dialed the number and a man answered. "It's for you, Rita," the man said. I thought he sounded a little peeved.

"Hey, it's me. About last night. Well, you know."

"Don't worry about it, Byron. I should know better than to have expectations."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that. I just wanted to say . . ." I paused for a second. "It was good seeing you. Talking and stuff. I know I ruined it, and, well, fuck if I know what to say but I'm real sorry."

"Byron, don't do this." Her voice was real shallow, like she was gulping for air. "Why did you call me anyway? To make me feel guilty? It's not going to work this time. I'm tired of all of it."

"I don't know what I'm trying to do."

"Please don't call me again," she said.

"Baby . . ." I said. The phone clicked softly. There was half a bottle of Seagram's Seven in the bedroom, and I decided to go looking for it. I opened the drawer to my bedside table and found this gag gift someone had given us on our anniversary—a statuette of two pigs holding hands. One pig had on overalls, and the other wore a pink dress. The base had an inscription that read "Byron & Rita: Happy as pigs in slop."

The next morning I woke up with the sun pounding on my face. I tried to open my eyes, but a hot pain shot through my head. The bed was wet. I must have pissed on myself, and it was Sunday, the nurse's day off. I was a fine picture—steeping in my own waste, my head feeling like it had been cauterized—and what did I want? Goddamnit, I wanted a drink.

I was trying to figure out where I had a bottle stashed when someone started knocking on the door. I wanted to say, "Go away," but couldn't. I sat there and hoped they'd just leave after awhile. "It's me, Byron," a voice said. It took a few seconds to realize it was Rita.

"Go on," I managed. "Leave me the hell alone." The door cracked open. Must have forgotten to lock it. I could see Jake behind her wagging his tail. The traitor. "Don't come in. Please."

"My God." Rita was standing beside the bed. She looked as though she was about to cry or throw up. I couldn't tell, maybe both. "What are you doing?"

"Guess I peed myself."

She wrinkled her nose. She smelled it now.

"I love the smell of urine in the morning," I said. She laughed a little.

"I saw that."

"What?"

"You laughed at a pathetic, drunk, handicapped man."

She looked me all over. For the first time in a long while it felt like she was actually seeing me. "I was worried about you," she said. She began walking around the place, checking out ground zero. "And with good reason."

"Don't mind the mess," I said. "The maid's been slacking off."

"I can see that." Rita began rummaging under the sink.

"What are you doing?"

"Gonna clean."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know."

"You know what I been missing? Your coffee. I remember how you'd get up early for school and make that coffee."

"Chicory," she said.

"What?"

"Chicory. That's the secret. Maybe I'll make some for you, if you want."

"That'd be nice." I just watched her clean for awhile. "Mr. Stockbroker know you out visiting?"

"Rob. His name is Rob," she said. "And to answer your question, he doesn't know because I don't have to tell him or you everything I do. I'm grown. I do what I want."

"So why come here?"

"Honestly, I don't know, Byron." She came over and stood beside the bed. "Let's get you cleaned up. Here . . ." She leaned over and pulled me to sitting position. Our faces were close together and I couldn't help it. I kissed her. She pulled her head back and looked at me, terrified.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have. Just go on." I motioned to the door. "Leave me alone. I don't blame you."

"No. I won't let you do this. Get into the chair." She helped me into the bathtub, filled it up with hot water and began to clean every inch of my body.

"There's a bottle right there beside the toilet," I said. "Why don't you hand it to me."

"Please don't drink. You me want to come around, don't you?"

"All right."

After the bath, I felt pretty good considering I hadn't had a drink all morning. I'd forgotten what it felt like to be clean—the way your skin feels all new.

The place was as spic and span as it was ever going to get when she left.

"Think about Frankie," she said. "He asks me all the time why he can't see you. I tell him you're sick, but I don't think he believes me anymore."

"I do want to see him. I don't know."

Rita sighed. “You can only push this so far, Byron. One day we’ll both be gone, and what will you have then? Think about that.”

“All right.”

I wheeled over to the window and watched her through the Venetian blinds. She couldn’t see me. Her face was like one of those china dolls. All white and smooth. She was crying a little, I could tell. I felt bad deep down in my soul. I wanted to do something to make things better.

Then I felt that itch, that tickling from another place just as deep.

For a few days, I was too depressed to leave the house. I didn’t even go down to the Town & Country. The cleanness began to bother me, like a standard I couldn’t live up to.

I even got to thinking I’d try the AA meeting down at Grace Methodist. There was a time before the accident when I was getting my act together a little. Sat there with those desperate sad sacks breathing the odor of stale cigarettes and that churchy smell, which is clean and dirty at the same time, like bleach poured on top of mess. It was no good for me back then, but somehow I found myself rolling toward the corner of Main and East Greer where the church was.

Some guy was playing a guitar out front of the social hall while a few other people were standing around smoking and listening. He was singing a Hank Williams song and trying to get that whine in his voice but failing pretty badly.

When I pulled up, they were all looking at me, noticing I wasn’t a regular, and probably anticipating hearing some fresh misery.

The man stopped playing and said, “Good ole Hank, what a drunk,” to nobody in particular.

"You know any John Denver?" I said. "Maybe 'Rocky Mountain High.' That's a good one."

The man seemed to really be thinking about it. "No, sir. I only play Hank. Meme-orized forty songs or so. Keeps me busy, I guess." He chuckled like this was real funny, and about this time everyone started flicking their cigarettes into the street, getting ready to go into the meeting. The hall's floor was that baggy linoleum you sometimes find in old places like this. It was a little hard to get across, almost like I was rolling on pudding. I parked myself behind the last row of folding chairs, where it wasn't so bright.

Everyone knew what was coming, but I had forgotten the routine. I mumbled the serenity prayer and the twelve articles, wishing I'd just gone down to the Town & Country instead.

Finally, things got started. This old man stood up, face all patchy like a dog with mange and wearing some denim leisure suit straight from the Seventies. He babbled on and on about how he wasn't getting along with his daughter. He said he'd been taking the rubbing alcohol out it was starting to look like hundred year old cognac. Then I noticed the woman sitting next to the codger. She was getting awful uncomfortable.

"She treats me like a goddamn baby," the old man said.

"Hush now, Daddy," said the woman, putting her hand on his arm like she wanted to yank him down, but he jerked away.

"I got a right. I got a right to say how I feel, don't I?"

"Leave him be," somebody said.

She just turned around and glared.

"You got no idear what it's like. I'm just about tired of it all."

The old man started crying, and his daughter got up and hugged him, though she looked like she'd have strangled him just as well.

"My baby doll," he said over and over. A few people clapped, but most people just acted bored, as though they'd seen this show before. They stood there for another minute looking more like they were wrestling than hugging, and I started to wonder if she would cry at his funeral or just be relieved.

Later on that week, I realized I was down to my last bottle of Jack so I got ready for the pilgrimage to the liquor store. It was about half a mile away, and I had to cross two lights to get there. I wasn't looking forward to the trip.

It was sunny outside, a real beautiful day. I hadn't been paying much attention to the weather. I rolled down the back porch ramp and was about to head out when I saw the boards lying beside the doghouse. Then Jake came over with his sad eyes. "Don't look at me like that, Dammnit." I wanted a drink, but Jake kept looking at me. "All right," I said. In the garage, I found a couple of saw horses, an electric saw, a level, and a hammer. I managed to get everything set up and began measuring boards. Then I started cutting. In my former two-legged life, I was a carpenter, among other things. I loved the spicy smell of sawdust, and the way I could make things fit together. I could make something that would be there for years to come. There's some pride in that. Everything in its place. That stuff was just as easy to me as 2+2=4. It seemed like a long time ago, like someone else's life that had been told to me. Of course, I managed to fuck it up like everything else. Just a few beers with lunch at Godiva's wouldn't hurt. Maybe a shot to wet the whistle before quitting time. A little pre-emptive strike on the

coming evening. Who would know, I thought. I didn't anticipate falling. That was not part of the arithmetic.

Jake licked my hand and I scratched him behind the ear. "At least I have you," I said, and Jake seemed to smile at me. When I finished up, a car pulled into the driveway. Jim was coming to check on me.

"So," he said and pointed to the doghouse. "This is encouraging."

"You sound like the shrink." We looked at each other for a minute, and I realized that we hadn't talked in a week.

"Give me a ride to the liquor store," I said.

"I don't think that contraption will fit in my car."

"Then walk with me."

"All right." Jim started clenching and unclenching his artificial hand, a habit he has.

"You probably scare children with that thing." I was feeling sick. My stomach felt like a deep pit, and I was a little woozy. If I didn't get a drink soon, it would be bad.

"It's nice not to know what your body is doing sometimes. This hand has a mind of its own. It's like a separate part of me."

"Very deep." I was beginning to sweat.

"You don't feel that way about your legs?"

"I don't know. I try not to think about it most of the time."

"The unexamined life," he said.

"What?"

"You know. The unexamined life isn't worth living."

"Never heard that one."

"That's Socrates. Or maybe Sophocles. I read it in this book Kathy sent me." He looked a little sheepish because he knew what I thought of Kathy.

"Well, that's a woman for you," I said. "Fucks your life all to hell and then gives you a book to explain why she done it. Here's my stop."

"It's not like that at all, Byron. You're the biggest hypocrite, anyway, pining away for Rita like a scalded dog."

"All right," I said. "That's enough of that."

We went into the store and Willis, the owner, was all smiles because he knew I was about to lay a couple hundred on him. Not like these old drunks that bought three dollar bottles of Thunderbird. As I began to make my selections for the week, I could tell Jim was working up to something.

"You know, this is really getting to be a problem. I've been meaning to say something for a while."

"I appreciate the concern," I said and broke the seal on a bottle of Jack, the old favorite. The first swig was like electricity running through my body. A fire in my stomach.

"Hey, don't drink it in here," Willis said.

"Take it easy," I said. "I just needed a taste."

Willis was smiling nervously. "All right, Byron. Just for you we'll make an exception."

Jim stood by the door and watched us with a sour expression on his face. As we went back, Jim said, "I wonder how long you can keep this up."

"That's a good question."

"I was thinking we could go on a picnic," Rita said on the phone. "You, me, and Frankie. Get some fried chicken, go down to the lake."

"I don't know. Frankie really wants to see me?"

"I wouldn't be asking if he didn't."

"Well, all right, then."

"This Saturday," she said.

We rode in Rita's car with the windows down. Frankie sat with me in the backseat. I didn't know what to say, so I just kept smiling. I smiled so hard my face hurt. Frankie put his hand in mine as we pulled into the parking lot of the Y beach. The water was a hard gleam in the sun.

"You okay?" Rita said. I nodded and she set up the chair and helped me out of the car.

"You're awfully good at this," I said.

"Lots of practice."

"I can swim really good now," Frankie said shyly as though I might not believe him.

"There's a pool at Rob's apartment," Rita said.

"Right." There was always something getting in the way. I carried the cooler on my lap. We found a concrete table under a tree. Rita put a tablecloth over it and started to get the food out.

"I'm gonna go down to the water," Frankie said.

"All right. Just for a minute. We're going to eat soon," said Rita, smiling.

When Frankie left, I said, "You know, I haven't really thought about this Rob fella. I guess you were seeing him for a while."

"I did some work with him when I got that job with the accountant. We were just friends for a long time. He's a good man. Someone who can listen."

"I never cheated on you. Even the time you thought I was going around with that girl."

She didn't say anything, just kept putting plastic plates and cups out like she was setting the table at home.

"Do you remember our honeymoon in the Keys?" I said. Rita nodded. "It's funny, but I think about it a lot now. Everything was so easy back then. I just want it to be back the way it was, I guess."

"You know it can't be. We're different now."

"Yeah. Look at him," I said and pointed at Frankie down by the shore skipping rocks. A little breeze picked up. We watched him play.

"You can see him more if you want," Rita said. She looked at me and smiled. It wasn't a happy smile. Then she walked down to get Frankie and left me by myself. The lake sparkled in the sun. It was a perfect day. I knew I shouldn't want a drink, but I did. I had a little bottle of Jim Beam, the kind they give you on an airplane, stashed under my seat cushion for emergencies. I tried to lift myself out of the chair a little. It was hard, but I finally found it. I unscrewed the cap and looked down at Rita and Frankie to make sure they weren't watching. Both of them turned and waved. I waved back with my free hand and wondered if I shouldn't go down to them. The path looked difficult. It wasn't flat at all.

CHAPTER 5:

IN THE EVENING

I guess everyone knows about me by now, though most people don't really look at me and Patsy any differently than they did before, which is to say they don't notice us at all. We're just another old couple holding on and waiting to die. For awhile there someone was leaving casserole dishes on the front stoop for Patsy when I was in the county jail. Sometimes she didn't feel like getting up and she'd find it out there the next day all smelly and congealed. Then she's throw away the spoiled casserole and clean up the dish real good and leave it out for whoever to come get so they wouldn't think she didn't appreciate the gesture.

It used to be that I did all the dishes, but now Patsy says I can cook and she'll do the cleaning. She says she likes the hot water and the suds sliding between her fingers. Sometimes I find her just staring into the sink, her hands buried in a mound of soap bubbles.

"Honey," I'll say. "What you doin?" And then she turns and looks at me kind of startled as though she's been dreaming and I guess she has. Sometimes I wonder what it is she's been dreaming and if I'm there with her but I don't ask.

On the shelf above the sink is a little plastic container that holds all the pills she has to take. It has raised letters for each day of the week on it and the tops open like miniature doors. The pills are all colors and sizes and I have a hard time keeping them straight. Every Monday, I sit down with the pharmacist at the Eckerds and make sure everything is in its right place.

There is one pill that's big and tastes bitter that she always tries to pretend she's taken but really she's hid it in her napkin. So we make a little game of it.

I'll say, "What we have here," and she'll giggle a little bit.

"Don't know. Look big enough to choke a horse to me." I offer to break it in half but she says it will just taste worse then. Sometimes, though, it's not so fun and she starts to cry.

Even with Medicare, all those pills cost two hundred and fifty dollars every month. So that's pretty much the reason why I started thinking about how to make more money, pure and simple. It was giving me a real tight feeling when I went over the check book every week. I'd just sit there until the numbers started to squirm around on the page.

Sometimes I'd get a job mowing someone's grass. Truth is, though, most people around here don't care too much if their lawn is mowed or not. I tried to go over to Brown Ave once and go from door to door, but those folks got a whole fleet of men with trucks and sometimes wearing uniforms who take care of their nice yards, so green it's like the one time I ever made it up to Triple-A in Durham and the grass smelled like the big leagues. That was a long time ago and no one even remembers what I did back then anymore, just what they read in the papers.

A few years ago, I had this job sweeping up a giant mill they were building, all automated and nothing like what I used to know when I worked at Chiquola. When I got there the first day, the boss looks at my high top Reeboks and says, "Didn't they tell you this is a construction site? You got to be wearing work boots. Can't work here without them."

So I had to go over to the Wal-Mart and spend forty-five dollars on some boots, and I never did like that man because he didn't have to treat me that way, like I was dumb. Even though I had done a lot of things in my life, I never did work construction, so you see, I just didn't know, but I can learn anything if you give me a chance.

This job paid eight dollars an hour, which was pretty good, and sometimes they would give you a little extra under the table if you would stay and work late. All I did was push a mop around and pick up trash. These two boys worked with me, I'm guessing they were hardly eighteen. We would always try to hide somewhere and rest and one of them, Daryl, would tell me stories about his life, and how much money he used to make selling crack.

"Pops," he'd say, "I have me a knot like this, I mean like as big as my fist. And it easy money, you know. Not like this here boo shee-it, pushin a broom up and down."

I would listen to him talk and brag and didn't usually say too much. But once I said, "If you was making so much money, why did you stop?"

"Feel bad, I guess. You know you just fuckin up somebody baby, somebody boy."

Truth is I didn't really believe him. I figured he just got tired of running from the cops. Daryl also told me how to make crack, how you mix it with baking soda and boil it on the stove. Told me how the rocks are supposed to be just a little off-color, like a bad tooth, and how it was better if you washed them with water and put them in the freezer for a little while.

"Smoke better," he said. "Junkie come back again and again if he like the product."

Once on lunch break, I took those boys down to Lake Hartwell in the back of my truck, and Daryl stripped to his boxers and jumped in and swam around like an otter. I never saw him as happy as then. He clowned around and smiled and called out to me, "Hey Pops, come on in, the water just fine."

I saw in the paper where they found Daryl down in the swamps past the fairgrounds, bullet in his head.

I guess I've pretty much lived my life without thinking about things too hard. I just never paid much attention to all the stuff on the outside; it was like when you get in a groove throwing the ball and you aren't thinking of nothing but getting it back and hurling it in there again. Your body just knows what to do and does it and your mind focuses in on that one thing and everything else slides around you. But that was before I met Patsy.

When we went to that doctor and he started talking about putting her in the hospital and injecting all this poison into her, I couldn't hardly get my head around it. You say to yourself, "Cancer," and you know it is bad, but you just can't really see it because she is there and seems so fine wearing a pink floral print dress and not really knowing what to say either.

There was a lot I didn't understand. This doctor talked to us. He was nice, but I kept looking at his little white teeth when he spoke and I just couldn't hear him. All those words that didn't make any sense.

"Well," he said, "Your wife has chronic myelogenous leukemia. Basically, these myeloid cells are multiplying in her bone marrow and getting into her blood, taking up space they shouldn't be taking. Which is . . . bad. But there are certain ways to treat this. I think if we went after it aggressively maybe we can get a handle on it."

"What you mean?" Patsy said.

"Well, I was thinking chemotherapy, of course. We have tyrosine kinase inhibitors now that directly target the molecular abnormality. I'd like to try these out on you. We think the results will be very satisfactory."

All the while he was talking he was smiling this little smile as if all this was just the most pleasant thing to be chatting about, like who was gonna win the game on Saturday.

"No, uh-uh," Patsy said. "I seen this on TV. My hair gonna fall out. Don't let them make my hair fall out, Henry."

"It's all right, baby, I ain't."

"It's about quality of life versus quantity, really, Mr. Mattison," the doctor went on. "If the chemo worked, your wife may have five or six years. Maybe more, who knows? But she'll also feel really bad for awhile here. That's the reality of chemo, okay? Now untreated, we are looking at maybe two years tops if I had to put a number on it. But she might feel pretty good for a little while yet."

"Don't want my hair to fall out, Henry."

"You got some pills she can take?" I said.

The doctor looked at us then like wanted to be shut of us, but he kept on smiling.

"I'm referring you to Stan Von Hoff," he said.

"You married?" I said.

"Divorced."

In the car, I thought about him going back to his nice big quiet home and just sitting there with no one to talk to and I felt sorry for him.

So I started to pick up aluminum cans and haul them out to Morton's Metal. In the evenings we sat and watched *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*.

"You know that Vanna White looking a little rough," Patsy said one night. "She a Carolina girl, so I cut her a little slack, though."

"Sure enough, where she from?"

"Myrtle Beach. Don't you remember that sign they got up? We drove right by it when we went down there."

"That was a good trip," I said, but Patsy was busy trying to figure out the puzzle.

I first met Mike Jones down at a place called Alfie's Playpen where I would go sometimes and drink a tallboy or two. I wouldn't tell Patsy where I was going, because it wasn't the type of place she approved of—just a joint where nothing good could happen. The walls were bare slat boards and someone had taken some black and red spray paint and made the rough outline of a horse near the door. The local high school was the mustangs and that was their colors. There were a few pool tables with patchy felt and some chairs that Juicy, the owner, must have bought at a school auction.

Mike was always playing poker in the back. He'd come out and look around every once in a while with his big, white eyes. He had this little grin, like a kid about to do something he knew he was going to get into trouble for. His friends called him Mikey Dee. I never saw him drink anything but water, and Juicy didn't seem to like him, but he tolerated him just the same.

I was talking about how much money I was paying for the medicine, when Mike started to pay attention to me. His eyes narrowed a little and he took a few steps toward us.

"You need some money?" he said.

"Don't trust this boy," Juicy interrupted. "He a snake and spider and graveyard dirt all mixed up together. This boy will step on his mother for a dime."

Juicy was smiling, like it was all in fun, but there was something in his voice.

"I'll lend you some money," Mike said. "What you need?"

"I don't know," I said. "I ain't looking to get in with some loan shark."

"That ain't my style, is it Juicy?" Mike shot a look at Juicy and then glanced over at a sign on the wall that said, "O Lord please help me keep my damn nose out of other peples bisness." There was a little drawing of man with a long nose like an elephant with a red dot on the end.

"I like that," Mike said to no one in particular. "Kind of a good philosophy to live by. Keep you out of trouble."

Juicy walked away and started to put some Old Milwaukee cans in the refrigerator. He hummed and muttered some words under his breath. It sounded familiar, like a hymn I used to sing when I was little.

"I want to help you out," Mike said. He seemed to be listening to the song, too. "Smoke?"

I shook my head, trying to tell myself this wasn't even worth listening to, that I should just go on home.

"I'm a facilitator, you see. I'm not like some bank always wanting my cut. I just put people and opportunities together." He smiled again and blew a long stream of smoke towards the ceiling. You could see the strands of it swirling around the hot bulb that hung from an extension cord.

"What you have in mind?" I said.

"Come over to see me at my crib. We'll work it out. Purple house at the end of Slaton." He started to walk away towards the backroom. "We'll see you later, brother. There's some fish back here that's just giving they money away."

Of course, I could have left it at that, but I didn't.

The room we were in had bags of trash piled up all in one corner. Mike said that he never put his trash on the curb. The cops would steal it and look through it.

"They best have a warrant if they want to sniff around my castoffs."

Mike played with his dog for awhile and we talked about some people we both knew. He liked to talk to me for some reason. I could tell he trusted me. Maybe he even wanted my respect, I don't know. A fellow like him can't have too many friends.

"So, you really want to do this," he said.

I nodded my head. "Don't see much else I can do."

"You know, the pit bull is a misunderstood breed," Mike said. "You see, most people look at a pit bull and they just think, 'killer.' But they don't look under the surface, you know. Like these dogs is loyal and real sweet if you get to know them. Like Cassius here, he's just a big puppy." Mike had a tennis ball and Cassius was jerking at it.

"But when they get hold of you, it's lights out. They got you. That is the truth. You just have to make sure you stay on they good side. You dig?"

"Yeah, I get you." I put the bag in my coat. It felt light as a feather, like nothing. Somehow, I'd convinced myself that it was nothing.

Now I guess because Mikey had spread the word, some people began to come around. They were usually nervous, like they couldn't keep their head from looking down the road every few seconds, and they would bounce back and forth on their heels. Their eyes had a tainted look, like their eyeballs were stained with yellow smoke coming from the inside. I thought about what Daryl had told me and I knew that maybe he had told the truth; maybe he had been sorry.

That was when I started to hide things from Patsy. I would tell her that I was going for a walk sometimes or that I was picking up cans. She got tired a good bit, and I'd just leave her sleeping to go do my business. Sometimes I'd have a picture in my mind of her sleeping so peacefully, and I'd carry it with me like a videotape running, like I was still there watching her. I also carried the rocks with me in a bag of Redman. I'd say, "You want some chaw?" and it would go down like that.

After Patsy would fall asleep on the couch watching the news, I'd sit at the kitchen table and unfold all the grimy ones and fives. It kind of disgusted me to touch the money, thinking about where it had been, whose hands it had passed between and what those people might have done to get it, but I smoothed those bills out just the same because I love my wife.

"You doing good bidness, Henry."

Mikey was wearing a brown shirt with the picture of a revolver on it. Some rap junk was pounding on the stereo. I was feeling weighed down and my head was light like it was about to fly off my body. By then it wasn't so easy for me to sleep and I felt tired all the time. Sometimes I got dizzy.

"What's that smell?"

"What you think?" Mikey crooked his eyebrow and smirked. He was bobbing and keeping time along with the singer, if you could call it singing

"You like Eazy-E? This here is some serious old school from the West coast."

"I prefer Otis Redding."

Mikey nodded and laughed.

"You all right, Henry, you know that? Now let's discuss a few things. You want to provide for yo wife, am I right?"

I nodded, wondering how far I was willing to go down this path.

"Now selling these here piddly ass nickel and dime bags is okay, but you ain't going to make any real cash. Junkies always wanting to argue, and for you to break up the rocks. They ain't got no money noway. You might as well be working at McDonalds, you know? But if you were willing to make some deliveries for me. Well, then you'd start seeing some real green. Nice and clean and slick." He took a roll of twenties from his pocket and put it in my hand. "How does that feel? Feels like a lot of medicine, don't it? Feels like a nice dinner out with yo wife at Liberty Hall. You just take this here over to Quentin." The bag he put in my hand wasn't light as a feather. I knew then that I was in the wrong, but I couldn't give it back to him. I just held it like it was some kind of alien object, something I couldn't believe I'd found.

When I got back home that night, I opened the door real quiet so I wouldn't wake up Patsy. I left the package outside in my shed, underneath the lawn mower. When I came up to her on the couch, she was asleep. She had a grimace on her face and it seemed like she was in pain. Her eyes twitched behind her eyelids and she was dreaming again. Sometimes she would tell me her dreams, but often they just scared her so much she couldn't speak it. Once, though, she told me how she had been flying, only it wasn't like Superman. She was swimming through the air and every stroke took her farther away from the earth until she could look down and see all of Bolton, then the Saluda River snaking around the county, and then she flew through clouds and it felt like the mist was kissing her face. I sat there for awhile and imagined her flying through those clouds.

"Ha," she said and roused. "Why you been out so late?"

"Just restless, I guess."

"You ain't seeing no other woman?"

"Oh nooo," I said and laughed.

"Well, that's good, because I might have to snatch someone bald if she was messing with my man."

"Well, I don't want to be the cause of no trouble."

"No, you never have caused me trouble, I'll give you that, even if you did eat the last piece of pecan pie."

"Aww now," I said and helped her to bed. I had forgotten, for the moment, what was out back.

The next day, though, I knew just what I had to do, and I sat studying the address in my wallet.

"Going on to Quentin," I said to Patsy. "Got some errands I gotta run."

I went over to Four Fingers and got some barbecue sandwiches and put the package down under the sandwiches.

It all didn't feel right, but I couldn't say exactly why. I'm not too good at puzzles.

"You from Mikey?" the kid said. I didn't like the way he licked his lips. The faint tang of pot seemed to linger on him.

"Mmm, lunch. How you know that I was hungry?" He looked in the bag. "Oh yeah, just what I wanted." Then he started giggling. He had a silver and gold cap on his front teeth.

"Man, Mikey is employing the senior citizens. Da-mn."

"I'm just trying to make a dime, same as you," I said and walked back to my truck. As I was riding back home, my hands were shaking. I just wanted to sit down with Patsy and tell her everything and we could cry about it and she would tell me I had my heart in the right place, but I didn't need to do it anymore. We'd find a way, she would say to me, and that would be that.

But what does a man do but hold on to the terrible things he done? He lets it sit there growing in his chest, a burden that's all his. I toted it around until the time came.

I admit now that it was my fault. I knew exactly what I was doing, if that's your question. And I guess it was me that broke Patsy's heart that day. All them lights and the people come out to see what the ruckus was about, just gawking at me, a decent old timer, one of them fellas who walked up and down the street every day saying "Howdy" and smiling at everyone. Patsy stood on the porch yelling.

"What you doin, po-lice? What you doin? Henry ain't done nothing."

"Hush now," I said. The deputy had his hand on my arm, so light as though he was afraid I might break. "It's all right, I'm ready." He nodded at the car, and I started to walk with him.

"But Henry, you innocent. Tell them you ain't done nothing," Patsy wailed.

I was choked up. I couldn't say a thing. That sure did almost kill me

I don't know the whereabouts of Mike Jones. Sometimes, though, I'll find a torn up tennis ball on my porch. In the evenings now, I'll sit out under the cottonwood in a fold up chair and listen to the cicadas bleat. I watch the sky above the house across the road grow purple and fade into darkness. I look at the light around the window shades there and think about them getting ready to eat as the neighborhood kids rush by shouting and playing. We didn't have no

children because we got married so late. I like to watch the little boogers now. And then the mommas are calling and they all disappear and it's just me sitting here in the cool of the evening.

CHAPTER 6:

JUST ACT AS NORMAL AS POSSIBLE

Outside of Kingsport, Tennessee, sprawls a huge Eastman Kodak plant, a town in itself full of smoke, train tracks, and cauldrons of chemicals. The grimy windows of the buildings are the eyes of sick, dying men. They are tinctured the yellowish black of a slow healing bruise. And the town has a smell, too, of something gone rancid. Sometimes the wind shifts, bringing an odor similar to day-old cat food, a niggling reminder that the plant is there.

But Kingsport was cooler than South Carolina in the summertime so I liked it well enough. The sidewalks humped up from the tree roots, and I would pedal fast, pick up speed, and make jumps pretending I was Evel Knievel. I rode deep into my grandparents' neighborhood in the evenings, exploring. Most of the houses were stone or brick and seemed to belong in some English village. I rode until I was afraid I didn't know how to get back, sometimes to the edge of the downtown, where the houses were squat and ugly, with paint hanging like loose skin. Teenagers with scraggly mullets bent over Camaros or Thunderbirds, and shirtless old men sat smoking on ramshackle, tilting porches.

Earlier that summer, I rode down the long, sloping hill to our house and found you sitting there on the front steps, your head bowed like you had suddenly gotten religion. There were dark stains on your green scrubs. "I'll be going away for a little while, Johnny," you said. "I'll be taking a little trip."

While we were in Kingsport, you sent a letter to me. It was written on white stationary. The letterhead had a picture of a sun sending out rays of light with "Calloway House" under it. Your angular scrawl was unmistakable. I carried the letter up to my room and sat down at Pop's desk. On the wall in front of me hung a picture of the graduating class of the 1938 Memphis School of Medicine. At the bottom left corner was Pop with a grin creasing his face. Beside me, on top of a tall bookcase, were the stacks of *Playboy* he hadn't bothered to hide before we came. If I stood on my toes, I could just glimpse the pouting woman wearing a gray fur coat and one of those Russian caps. An old fraternity paddle, smooth and lacquered, lay beside the magazines.

A wedge of afternoon sun shone on the desk. I sat there tranquilized, trying not to think about my desire to look at the *Playboys*, trying to focus on the words in front of me; it was hard to imagine them coming from you.

You wrote:

My dear son, how joyous I felt when I received your letter. It was like the sun breaking through the clouds on a dreary day. I miss you and your sister so much, but I know that being here is the right thing.

We stay busy. Sometimes I feel my hand will fall off because I write so much. Things are progressing. It is hard, but I am sure it will be worth it.

Please take care of your mother. This is a big responsibility, I know. You must be strong because of my weakness. I will see you soon. Love,

Dad

Were these your words? Had someone helped you write them? Maybe they had people there who would find the words you wanted to say, but couldn't.

For a long time, I only thought of you as a presence, the factory on the outskirts of town, an edifice looking out with hooded eyes. In the afternoons after school, I vaguely sensed you. Sometimes, if I ran up the stairs too fast, you blundered from your cavern of sheets like a bear; your gnarled black hair and pasty arms made me shudder inside.

Motes danced on the glinting streams of late afternoon light flooding through the windows. Somewhere I thought I heard kids screaming, and I began composing the lie I would tell when my friends asked me what I had done all summer long.

As I was creeping around my grandparents' house looking to entertain myself, I heard snatches of sounds, conversations. An old laundry chute ran from a small rectangular hole at the top of the stairs down into the basement. I liked to lean my head into it and listen to the churning of the washing machine and feel the damp air bathe my face. Sometimes I would drop my GI Joes down it. Once, I heard crying. I stood there, frozen, listening to Mom. She cried for a long time and I got tired. I ran down the stairs and rode my bike far into town, past the freshly mowed baseball fields, the Confederate monument and its pyramid of cannonballs, the defense factory with the armed guards and gates garlanded with razor wire. I rode until I was on the footbridge that spans the Holston River, foul and churning yellow and gray from the chemicals that Eastman dumps in it. I stood there on the middle of the bridge and tried to imagine I didn't exist, that I had no one at all to depend on, to worry about. Later on, after nine, I walked into the kitchen and everyone was in an uproar worried about me, and I felt bad about wishing I didn't belong to them. You know, of course, how hard that is. You always come back home in the end.

Do you remember that trip we took to The Biltmore Estate? Maybe you don't. You didn't want to come. You said you just felt like piddling around the house, which meant you would sit there and drink Jack Daniels all day and watch golf on TV. But Mom was adamant. She had planned on taking that trip for a long time and what she wanted, she said, was for us to spend time together like other families. Finally, you agreed to go, but you sat in the front seat the whole ride up and didn't speak. At the McDonald's in Hendersonville, you went to complain because you thought your burger was burned. As you yelled at the cashier, who was maybe sixteen, I stared at the floor and looked at a ketchup stain. Mom tapped her finger on the table as she stared straight ahead.

On the way back, you and Mom got into an argument. You told her to pull over and let you out. You said you would rather walk home than stay in the car another minute. "I'll just hitch," you screamed. "It'd be better company."

"Fine," Mom said and pulled over.

From the back window, I watched you recede. You looked lost, as if you didn't know which direction to go.

Later that night, you opened the front door. Your hair was drenched with sweat and you had a long cut on your cheek, a runnel of red. You made yourself a drink and sat down in your chair. No one talked. You had the look of a traveler who had been away from home for a long time. When you fell asleep later, I put a blanket across your chest. I didn't want you to be cold.

There were times that summer when I heard things. Once before dinner I crawled up behind the couch in the living room where Mom and Pop were talking by the bar. I could peek around the corner and see their legs. Beside the fireplace was a three foot tall statuette of a little

boy in overalls holding some bright red cherries. Pop had brought it up from his home place in Iuka, Mississippi. The little boy seemed to smile suspiciously as I listened to them talk about you. They were talking in whispers, but I could tell Mom was mad.

"It's not like you haven't popped a few pills yourself in your day."

"Now, you know after the herniated disk . . . pain is a little different than weakness."

"But he's a good man."

"Perhaps. Maybe . . . look out for yourself sometime. That's all I'm saying."

Pop came out from behind the bar, the ice glittering in his glass of whiskey. His burnished face always seemed a little menacing to me. As he sat down to watch the evening news, I thought he reminded me of you: grim, focused only on the screen. Just tuning everything out but the whiskey and the flitting images. I watched him as he swirled the amber-dark liquid.

Pop never liked you, did he? I guess it was hard to live up to such a successful man. He started his own surgical ophthalmology practice, the first in east Tennessee. He gave people sight. Everywhere we went with him someone came up and said, "Do you know who this is? He's a great man, your grandfather. A real lifesaver." Now, after selling out to his partners in Knoxville, he was worth millions. He never let you forget that you were only in family practice, that you never had the guts to be a surgeon. How many times did I see you light a check with the tip of your cigarette and watch it burn?

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That morning we came to visit you I woke up freezing. Marianne had gotten up in the night and turned the air conditioner down and then managed to steal all the sheets from me. The sun slanted through the motel room's Venetian blinds, waking me from a bad dream. My heart

was racing. The air conditioner hummed on, but the world seemed like it had stopped. Marianne was buried in her cocoon of sheets; in the other bed Mom had her back to me. Her shoulder dipped so slightly as she breathed. She has dark freckles there from years at the beach with her family. In a picture on the wall of Pop and Nana's house, she is looking serenely at the camera and waving, the Pacific Ocean shimmering behind her. She has a deep tan. That was the vacation in Hawaii when Aunt Opal, the pedant of fun, made her learn the Huki-la.

I got up to turn down the air conditioner, and Mom rolled over and noticed me standing there. "You're up early." I went and sat at the end of her bed. "You'd never know we were in Charleston in here. Open that door and the humidity will blast you in the face." I just sat with my back to her, shivering. She touched my side with her big toe. "Are you ready for all this?" she said.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Maybe, before the visit, we'll go over and see the apartment we stayed in while Dad was doing his residency. Do you remember?"

"Not really."

"It'll come back to you."

Sometimes I did remember something, like making a sand castle or licking a bowl of icing, but then I realized that was just in pictures. All that summer Mom would get the photo albums out to thumb through. When we looked at the pictures, she would talk as though it were yesterday, laughing about all my shenanigans. Those moments darted around like hummingbirds, always just a little blurry, always mercurial.

We weren't allowed to come to Calloway House until after lunch, so we went to the Battery and walked past Rainbow Row: all those old mansions the color of prom dresses—mint, peach, and aqua. Fort Sumter was a crumpled hat out in the middle of the harbor. Gulls swooped about and the glare of the sun spread on the green water. We stood by a tremendous black cannon and I imagined what it must have been like to light the first fuse, the concussion that would reverberate in your head for a long time afterward.

I did have one memory, more vivid than the pictures. Once we rode out on a boat to see the fort. I must have been very small. You held me on your shoulders as we walked around and I could feel the cool sweat from your neck dripping on my legs. I put my hand in a canon hole and scraped my knuckle on the torn rocks and I cried. I don't know if you comforted me, if you took me in your arms.

"So are you ready to go to James Island?" Mom said. "We'll give the place a look for old time's sake, and then we'll go see Dad. How does that sound?"

As we rode near the inter-coastal waterway, the odor of mud and decay got stronger, but underneath a brisk smell of rain and sand, of a winnowing cleanness, too. Mom told us about the first years of your marriage and how she had to sell the television so you could pass med school. And she told a story about Fred, someone you knew from school who would invite himself over occasionally and talk both of your ears off and how, one night, Mom realized that you had gone to bed and left her to deal with Fred.

"We called him Dead . . . well never mind what we called him."

"But why would he do that?" I said.

"Who, Fred? He was just harmless, a little lonely."

"No, I mean Dad."

"Your father certainly never suffered a fool gladly."

"But why would he leave you alone like that?"

"Just didn't feel like being there, I guess." We crossed over onto James Island as an ivory colored yacht and a smudged trawler passed under the bridge. I watched them through the rear window.

"You know this bridge used to be a lot lower," Mom said. "There was a drawbridge, and if you were unlucky, you might spend upward of half an hour just sitting there as the boats floated past. It would make your father so mad. Just having to sit and wait."

The part of James Island where we had once lived had gone downhill. Most of the buildings were abandoned. The windows that weren't boarded up were smashed, cracked into daggers of streaked glass. Our old duplexes surrounded a courtyard. There was no grass, just gravel and weeds, a few desiccated pine trees. I smelled the tang of wild onions. We stood there looking at a door sloppily coated with red paint; it was cheap wood, and the slivers at the bottom were peeling away.

"Well," Mom said. "Kind of fallen on hard times, I guess. This is where you used to play, Johnny. Right here. Do you remember that yellow Tonka truck you pushed all over the place?"

I shook my head. Nothing.

"You loved that truck. There were grooves on the sides from your little hands."

"What did you do with the truck?"

"Gave it away, I guess. With all the moves, who knows?"

We moved a lot. I never got settled at a school or made some friends before the Army reassigned you. And the last move before coming back to South Carolina, when we were in

Killeen, Texas, was that when you started? A whole new life before you, the regimented, easy order of the military sloughed off finally, and then you had to be responsible for the decisions. Maybe you had a patient who said, “Hey Doc, take these pills and get rid of them for me, will you? I’m feeling okay. I can take the pain all right. Got to be sharp on maneuvers, you know.” And you didn’t turn them in right away. You kept them in your pocket. Maybe you put them in your drawer and tried to forget they were there. A caramel colored plastic bottle with another man’s name on it. Then, one night, you couldn’t sleep because of the heat and the cicadas, and you opened that bottle, looked at a pill, whatever color it was, tan or pink or white, and it seemed so harmless. Is that how it went?

The moment was fast approaching when we would see you for the first time in months. The afternoon sun shot through a line of trees, splashing our faces every few seconds with a blinding light. I closed my eyes and saw patterns of red and orange in the squirming space behind my eyelids. I could hear Marianne fidgeting beside me, anxious to get out of the car and run and hug you.

“Are you excited?” she said.

“Why?”

“About going to see Dad, silly.”

“I guess.”

“I wonder if it’s a real nice place with columns.”

“Well, it’s a plantation, isn’t it?

“How do I know what a plantation looks like,” she said and huffed. “Dad said it was pretty. Lots of flowers and big trees.”

"I'm sure it is."

"You should be happier."

Mom slowed the Volvo down, checking the little wooden sign by a sandy turnoff and said, "All right, here we go." The driveway was chalky with ground shells. There was a canopy of live oaks with Spanish moss floating from the branches and bunches of wisteria drooping in fat clusters. And there was a plantation, too, just like in *Gone with the Wind*. When we walked in the front door and told the woman at the desk we were there to see you, she said you weren't in the "Big House," you were out back in a cabin. You were in the slave quarters. The woman was all smiles and smelled powdery and moist like an old woman, but she seemed young enough. She had on a lavender pantsuit with shoulder pads that made her look manly, and she walked briskly as she gave us the lowdown on what to expect.

"Now you might not see a dramatic change or anything. It takes a long time for prescription drugs to completely get out of the system. Sometimes it takes almost a year for the body's chemistry to get back in sync. But hopefully he'll seem more alert, focused." We were following her, chicks behind a mother hen. She stopped before the door to the cabin.

"I'm not going to tell you what to talk about," she said. "But I wouldn't get into anything too serious. Just enjoy your time and the beautiful day. Just act as normal as possible."

I looked in the window and saw you sitting on the bed. A very tall black man with a goatee was leaning over you, sticking a needle in your arm. You winced a little, then smiled when you looked up and saw me. The woman opened the door and we all burst in at once. The man wore a white coat and looked surprised, as if we had intruded on some private ritual. He must have been seven feet tall.

"Hey guys," you said as you rubbed your arm and stood up to hug Marianne and Mom. "Meet my man Raymond. He could have played for the Lakers."

The man, some kind of orderly, cracked a smile. "Now you know that ain't true, Doc," he said with a soft drawl.

We all hovered around you, smiling, and the orderly and the woman slipped out. You put your big hand on my shoulder blade and squeezed like a vise.

"I'm not kidding," you said. "Ray was all set to make the team and he just left. He told me he didn't know why, he just felt like LA wasn't the town for him. Strange, huh? Well, let me show you the place."

We walked around and you talked about all the thinking you'd been doing since you came here and how sorry you were for embarrassing us so much. Sometimes you would see someone, one of the other patients, and you would tell us about them.

"Now that girl was doing cocaine with Eddie Van Halen. I don't know who that is, some kind of rock star . . . And this guy over by the bench, he admitted in group to drinking aftershave because his wife had thrown out all his liquor. Imagine that! I guess I wasn't ever that bad . . . That dude is a cop over in Georgetown. Never know what kind of people you'll find here. All segments of the population." The words just poured out of you. I don't know if I had ever heard you talk so much. You seemed so happy to see us. I guess I didn't quite believe it.

We walked across the lawn, crisp as a new dollar bill. My nose began to run as it always does when I mow the grass. You gave me your handkerchief, red with white spades on it. "My country handkerchief," you said and laughed as you tousled my hair. "Now, our days are pretty filled up with meetings and therapy and tests, but sometimes they let us come out and play

softball or something. Just yesterday, I hit a home run." We came to a garden at the right of the house, with wrought iron benches and sculptures of winged cupids and Confederate generals.

"Kids, why don't you give your mother and me a few minutes alone, okay?"

I watched as you both walked down the driveway. You held Mom's hand. I saw you turn and put your hands on her shoulders. Maybe she was crying, I couldn't tell, but you hugged her. The knot in my stomach, the python of fear, slowly unloosened its grip.

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I find myself searching for moments. Sometimes they come unexpectedly.

Like the time we were sitting on the concrete steps of the temporary housing at Fort Hood. Bleak sand all around, dust and wind. Inside hot as a sweat box because the air conditioner wasn't working.

We were sitting there, sweat soaked, waiting for you to return. This was our second full day in Texas. The night before we had driven through the blank desert to get here, and then seeing the place, no more than a shot gun shack on cinderblocks, I couldn't help but be depressed. I had left all my friends again for this? But you and Mom joked and laughed, dubbed it "Our Humble Abode." While peeing, I looked up and saw the night sky, deep and black except for the shuddering of an occasional star. The beds had fleas. We scratched ourselves raw that night and then you went off to work at the base, promising to find something better. All that day, we waited for you. Mom and I played Go Fish, but our sweat kept dripping on the cheap cards and the dye stained our hands black and red, as though we had picked up a newspaper fresh off the press.

When you finally came home, we had all given up any pretense of amusement; we just stayed still, miserable and comatose in our acceptance of this misery. You looked at us for a minute without saying anything. A smile spread across your face.

"Surely this isn't my family?" you said. "You must be some refugees from the dust bowl."

"Did you find another house?" Mom said flatly.

"Not for another week. Remember this is the Army we're talking about." How our faces must have looked. The thought of another week was intolerable, even to Marianne, who was just a baby, because she began wailing as if on cue.

"But we're not staying here. Come on. Get the bags. I found a motel. Not too bad at all. And it has a pool!"

In the car, we cranked the air conditioner all the way up. I leaned between the seats, sticking my face as close as I could to the vent, and you didn't even tell me to buckle my seat belt. We stopped and got hamburgers and milk shakes. I savored mine, strawberry, as though it was the nectar of the gods. A film of condensation formed on the windows of the car, and I wrote my initials loop to loop, just as I had been taught in school that year.

Later, we all sat beside the limpid pool as the evening turned purple overhead. You had a beer in your hand and Mom was smiling as she played with Marianne. I did a cannonball from the diving board. Feeling the tepid water surround me, I held my breath as long as I could. My eyes shut, arms outstretched, I was suspended in that moment before the urge to breathe overtakes you, that serenity of waters which cannot last.

CHAPTER 7:

DEBTS

The first time I went to see him there, he handed me a tooth.

"Here," he said. "You keep it."

It was whiter than I would have supposed and streaked with rust-colored blood. He said he plucked it out the day before.

"Don't they have a dentist here? Dad says you haven't been brushing your teeth."

He waved his hand and smiled almost shyly. "What do you have for me?"

I remembered, then, that in my other hand I was holding a slice of mandarin orange cake left over from Sunday dinner at my in-laws.

"Oh, from Kate's grandmother." I looked at the tooth and hesitated. Who was I to deny him his pleasures? He ate it right there, standing in the hall, and smacked his lips when he finished.

"That's good. You tell her that, will you?"

"I will. You want to show me your room?" He nodded and began to shuffle down the hall. I smiled at the nurses. It wasn't so bad—very clean, in fact, though the smell of bad coffee and something else, something cave-like, lay just underneath the antiseptic harshness. His room was not too small and Granddad had arranged his spartan comforts neatly: slippers by the bed and his watch and wallet on the table; a bright orange afghan folded and placed at the foot of the bed; his robe and shirts hung in an old chifforobe.

I picked up his Cotton Bowl ring from the nightstand and slipped it on and off my finger. He had played center and nose guard and was good enough to be drafted by the Giants, but instead ended up flying a B-24 over Germany. I vaguely remembered him showing me the letter with the embossed blue NY logo and how unimpressed I was with the amount they offered to pay him. This was all before he met Grandmother. Everyone called him Big Red then. He once intercepted a pass and ran it back for a touchdown against South Carolina and the summer after his senior year he invited himself along on a friend's honeymoon trip to Myrtle Beach. Slept out on the sand and woke with an aching back and the sun glaring overhead. I thought about this other life, the possibility of what he could have become.

"You want to watch a ballgame?" I said. He nodded, no different than ever in his economical silences. I flipped through the channels and found some all-star football game. The players all wore different helmets from their various colleges.

"One of our boys," he noted. We sat intently, but neither of us was interested in the game. A feeling seemed to hang between us, some question that could not be addressed.

"Will you do something for me?" he said finally. I nodded my head. He looked at his roommate, who was snoring loudly. Granddad seemed to have taken a dislike to him. The nurses reported to my father that they sometimes found him standing beside the roommate with a pillow, looking as though he were about to smother the man.

"He's stealing me blind," Granddad said. The offender slept on blissfully. "Here. You take this." He tried to give me a handful of change. I was still holding the tooth clenched in my hand. I wrapped it in Kleenex and put it in my pocket. He pressed the money on me again, taking hold of my hand and dumping the assorted quarters and dimes like sand.

"Look," I said. "You might need this. To buy candy or something."

"You keep it for me. When I need it, I'll ask for it."

I went home and put the strange gifts in my dresser, among the socks and underwear. They remained there for years, relics that kept their secrets.

My wife, Kate, was surprisingly nice about my trips to visit Granddad. She understood the ties of blood. Her family had been in Beaverdam since before the Civil War, she liked to say. I don't know if I believed her or not. I suppose I just accepted her stories and didn't try to turn them over in my head too much for fear of finding the rotten bottom.

We lived in a small white house just off Main St. We could walk to the First Baptist Church. Kate made it a point every so often to remind me that her Granddaddy had paid for the pews we sat in.

I did not go to school anymore, but had a job hauling furniture for a moving company in Richton, a much bigger town about twenty miles up the highway. The long days were etched in the cords of my back by the weekend. My hands, the hands that Kate had proclaimed so lovely as I played the guitar for her when we were first dating, were now rough and bruised.

"How's school?" Granddad would ask sometimes.

"I'm not going now. I told you that."

"Too bad."

"Yes. I have a family now, you know. Got to be responsible."

Sometimes we played checkers. He could only concentrate for about five or six moves, though. Then his mind left for somewhere else and he started to make foolish moves, from red to black, and I would laugh and say, "Ahh, Granddad. You can't do that." It was hard not to

remember how good he had once been at the game. My sister and I never beat him when we were kids.

After a few weeks of his erratic play, we stopped altogether. Instead, I would walk with him to get ice cream, the kind they used to give you in elementary school with the flat wooden paddle that looks like a tongue depressor.

"That's two now, Mr. Caldwell," the nurse said. Apparently there was a limit. The nurses were usually nice, though none of them were pretty.

We walked the halls, and I looked into the rooms with a sense of distaste. A dignified black man in a wheel chair would nod politely to me. I always liked that little gesture because it seemed to indicate that he knew more than the rest of them; he was still holding on to something. As we walked, Granddad spun out his fantasies.

"This is the room where they bring you at night."

"What's that, Granddad?"

"I hear 'em down here yelling. When you are bad, they bring you here."

We both looked into the room, which contained a large metal tub, a whirlpool perhaps. There was some other machinery that didn't have any discernable purpose. Certainly not Bluebeard's chamber, though.

"I'm sure nothing like that goes on."

He gave me a knowing look.

"Oh yes."

We walked down the corridor. It was a very sunny place. As he stood by the window, the light in his face, I could see his hawkish profile, the emaciated cheeks. He swam in brightness.

One night, I pushed Kate down while she was holding Sam. I was half- asleep and I don't know why I did it. She fell on her shoulder to protect him.

"Oh my God," she kept saying.

I just put my hands in my face and sat down stupidly. Kate got up and placed Sam in his crib, then punched me hard in the arm.

"You bastard."

I sat there for a long while listening to him breathe, then went and got into bed. I woke up at 6:30, before the alarm, and I felt a catch up high in my chest like I couldn't breathe. I lay there and tried to force myself to inhale deeply. Then the alarm began beeping and I got up to get ready for work. We never said anything about it.

Sometimes he was lucid when I went to visit him: he would be able to say that my Uncle Danny had just come by to see him or that he'd had a piece of pecan pie with lunch. Progressively, though, he told wild stories. I was uncomfortable entering this space at first, but in time his world became almost familiar. It was as if his inner world was suddenly transparent. This place included a cast of characters—some real, some imaginary.

Years before, he'd broken his back in a fall and began to take painkillers. The medication gave him visions—he would wake up in the night to see midgets dancing around him. He described them as diminutive Japanese men tinted fluorescent green. They often chased him, and the only time I can recall hearing fear in his voice was when he mentioned the "little green men." They laughed malevolently at him. Worst of all, he could imagine their impish thoughts. They haunted him again now, and the nurses often found him lurching down the hall as he ran from his tormentors.

He also told elaborate stories about his past. I couldn't know how true they were, but they weren't any part of his history I was familiar with. He hinted at some alternate path that he could only take now, after he had done his duty, put in the time as obedient husband, stern father, somewhat taciturn but loving grandfather. These were the forgotten roads.

"Well, your mother has done it this time," he said. "She's dancing down at the Palms for everyone and his brother to see."

"What?" I didn't know yet how to access this new story. They were becoming more convoluted. "What's Grandmother doing?"

"You don't know? She's a hootchie-cootchie dancer now. I say good riddance."

"Oh come on, Granddad." We all knew that Grandmother never came to visit him here, but we tried not to mention it.

"I only tell you the truth, you know. She has little things right here that she spins around." He pointed at his chest and smirked. "It's a real shame."

"Okay," I said. "Let's go for a walk, all right. It's a beautiful spring day."

He kept looking at me, though, as if he knew I was humoring him and was almost sad at my ignorance.

He often confused me with my father and called me Luke. This was understandable because I looked very much like my father did when he was younger. Really, all of us looked alike. Seeing pictures of Dad or Granddad when they were my age often gave me a start. The ruddy face and cleft chin. The shock of thick hair and the slightly raised eyebrow. There I am kneeling with my crew in front of the "Dixie Jane" Flying Fortress or smiling crookedly before I

went on rounds, a stethoscope hung around my neck. I wondered what else had been transmitted in the genes. What kind of men were they, really, and who was I? What code had we all agreed to?

My son was about to turn one year old. Kate loved to plan any type of event, so the birthday party turned out to be a big one. We reserved the covered picnic area at the park, and my father-in-law, Randy, manned the grill like a general commanding troops. “The key to a flavorful hot dog,” he said to me, “is to dip it in Worcestershire sauce.” My wife’s family were dedicated carnivores. They appreciated a well cooked steak much more than the fact that I had a master’s degree in history. I was strange to them, and Kate’s mother, Lynette, never really forgave Kate when she dumped her high school boyfriend and took up with me.

“Well, here’s Brantley and her brood,” Lynette said to Kate. “You know they wouldn’t turn down a free meal.” Brantley was Kate’s cousin, and she had managed to have three children in five years. She was moderately pretty with long lustrous blonde hair, but if you looked close at her face, you could see the grainy skin beneath the orangey tint from the tanning bed. Her husband, Clark, rarely said much and worked in a cog factory. I felt sorry for him and asked him about hunting, which cheered him up.

“Where’s your Mom and Dad?” Kate came and whispered to me while I listened to Clark tell about the eight point buck he’d shot on his last trip. “They’re always late.”

“They’ll be here. They went to get Granddad, and they’re bringing Grandmother, too.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Well, I’d wish they’d get here so we can start things up.”

"I didn't know we were on a timetable. I thought this was a party." I picked up my son and whirled him around. "Right, Sammy?" He smiled at me, but I could tell Kate was irritated. She huffed and went over to pour some more drinks for the kids.

"Wait until you see the cake," Kate said to her mother. "I found this woman in Piedmont to make it. She makes all these theme cakes, you know. So I got one in the shape of a dinosaur." As I was pondering exactly how much this cake might have cost, my Mom's Volvo pulled up. I ran over to help Granddad get out of the car. He walked mainly with a walker now.

"Sorry we're late," Mom said. "You know how your father takes his sweet time."

Dad wore a somewhat surly expression. He did not like my wife's family, and I can imagine he dawdled in the basement, trying to avoid coming. I held out my hand and helped Granddad steady himself. He looked adrift as he gazed at the kids running by.

"Good to see you," I said.

"You see who came, don't you?"

"Who? Grandmother?"

"I'd forgotten what a beautiful woman she is."

"Hush now, Luke," she said to him. She turned to me as though he weren't there. "He's gotten so silly since he went to that place."

We gravitated to the picnic tables. All five of Kate's cousins had shown up, and their children now seemed to have infested every nook and cranny. Randy began passing out the hot dogs and we settled down to eat a noisy meal. Sam was cranky and seemed like he was getting sick. He fell asleep before we even brought out the candles and sang happy birthday. Kate wanted to wake him up, but I said let him sleep. We opened the presents. I really didn't know what we'd do with all the toys, but Kate seemed pleased.

Some cousins ran off and began playing in a little basin that was fed by an underground spring. Sometimes people would come to fill up milk jugs there because the water was reportedly medicinal. Brantley ran over and began to scream at the kids. “Y’all get the hell out of there or I’ll tan your hides. I don’t care if I ain’t your mama.” Dad gave me a look that said “How do you put up with all this?”

When it was time for them to go back, I helped Granddad to the car.

“Anne, let me come back and stay the night,” he said to my Grandmother.

“Now you know we can’t do that, Luke.”

“I just want to come home.”

I looked at my Dad then and he shook his head. They drove off as the evening began to come on. The sun was a great copper disc above the tennis courts. I walked back over to the tables and began to help clean up.

“What do you bet Brantley asks for the leftovers,” Lynette whispered to Kate.

“Give them to her,” I said. “We don’t need all this.”

“But Momma and Daddy paid for the food,” Kate said.

I didn’t say anything. Sam woke up and started to cry. Kate went over and picked him up. The sky was almost dark now and streaked with purple. You could hear the chattering of birds somewhere above. My mind went with Granddad. I imagined him waking in the night as he tried to navigate the intricate darkness.

Granddad’s roommate never seemed to wake up. I started to wonder about him. I watched him sleep. He had a large face with a fleshy bulbous nose, and he snored like a chain

saw revving up. He talked in his sleep with a stentorian voice loud enough to be heard down the hall. Granddad would sometimes shoot him antagonistic looks.

"Why don't you like him, Granddad?" I finally asked, expecting another wild story. "What has he done to you?"

"He's not a good person." Granddad had a petulant look on his face. "They give him my ice cream." Then he leaned over closer to me. "And he's done things. He made Smitty stand out in the rain all day. Then Smitty got pneumonia."

"Who's Smitty?"

"Oh he was English. A captain in the RAF. So short I called him a leprechaun, but he said he wasn't no bloody Irishman." Granddad smiled at the thought, but then looked back at his roommate and his face darkened. "He's a killer and one day we'll settle the score." Then everything began to fall in place for me. Granddad thought his roommate was one of the guards at the prison camp where he spent the last year and a half of the war. His hatred of all things German extended even to sauerkraut. I looked at the name tag on the door: Schmidt.

Once, when I came in to visit, a woman was sitting beside Mr. Schmidt. She looked about my age.

"Hello," she said and smiled. She seemed to be a very pleasant person and had long brown hair that I could imagine running my hands through.

"You may not realize it," I said to her. "But your granddad and mine are mortal enemies."

"Oh, this isn't my Grandfather," she said. "He's my step-father." She must have seen my startled face because she said quickly, "My mother was much younger when they married. He was good to her. What's this about being enemies?"

I laughed and told her about my theory. She was very interested.

"It is amazing what we hold onto inside," she said. We talked for a long while. After that day, I never saw her again, but every time I came afterwards, I would hope she'd be there.

One of the last times I went to visit him, I could tell he was very agitated about something. He hardly acknowledged me when I came up to him in the hallway. He seemed to be mumbling to himself.

"Granddad?" I touched his arm.

"Oh, it's you. Well, I guess you'd better come along and see this if you're here."

"What do you mean? Where are we going?"

"Of course you don't know because I kept these things from you all. I fed you on babe's milk. But a man's got to pay his debts and that's what I aim to do. Let's go. Where's your car? You can drive." He began to walk down the hallway towards the front desk where I had signed in just a few minutes before. His face looked set, as though he had made a decision. "Those boys thought I wouldn't come through, but I'm going to surprise them. Walk right up and lay it on the table. Yessir."

"Do you want to walk out to the gazebo?" I began to feel a bit unsettled and wanted to get him off this topic. The April wind was whipping around the parking lot, but it was bright and warm in the sun.

"Don't try to talk me out of this, Sully."

"Granddad, it's me, John."

"Come on to the car. Better to get it over with as soon as possible."

We stood there in the middle of the parking lot. A SUV pulled by us and honked. "I can't drive you, Granddad. We can't go."

His determined look softened a little. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

He looked around, completely lost. "I think I need to go to the bathroom," he said. We walked back together. I took little half steps so I wouldn't outpace him. I led him to his room. He left the door to the bathroom half open, so I wandered out into the hall to give him some privacy. Then I heard him calling me by my right name. When I came back into the room, he was standing by the bathroom door, his hand smeared with shit. I saw it embedded under his long nails.

"Had a little problem."

I wanted to take responsibility for him then, to clean up the mess, but I just couldn't face it. I'd had enough. I called the nurse.

"Happens all the time," she said as she snapped on her rubber gloves. "You go on. I'll take care of this."

"Bye Granddad."

"You had a little accident, Hon?" I heard the nurse say after I'd turned my back to go. My legs were shaking as I walked. I hated to contemplate my role in his life of small humiliations.

He died on a Saturday. I was home by myself because Kate had gone shopping with her mother. The quiet house felt like my own for once. I had a book propped open, but I was making very little headway. Words slid away from me. The phone rang and it was my father. He said the

nurses had called him and it looked like Granddad was not doing well. Since I was closest, would I go there until he could make it?

When I got to his room, he had his eyes closed and was taking short, quick breaths. His face seemed strange and animal-like. I took his hand. “I’m here, Granddad.” He didn’t open his eyes, but squeezed my hand hard. He wanted to talk. His mouth moved, but nothing came out. He just clenched and unclenched his jaw. For a moment, he opened his eyes and there was distance in the blue, a pure blue like incandescent waters.

“Am I dying?” he said, wheezing.

“I don’t know.”

“Good,” he said and closed his eyes.

I still held his hand when my father found us there. He leaned over and hugged me. “I had so many things I wanted to say to him,” he said. “So many things.”

After the service, the family went down to a large cafeteria-like room in the basement of the First Methodist and received those paying respects. I told Kate that she could go on home, and she gave me a sad smile. My Dad stood beside me in line.

“When the preacher asked me what hymns we wanted,” Dad said under his breath, “I had no idea we were going to sing every verse. That took forever.” He looked terribly uncomfortable in his suit. He kept fingering his tie and I could see the sweat stains under his armpits. He didn’t want to be there, and struggled to remember people’s names. “Now, who was that again?” he’d whisper to me or Mom.

We'd buried Granddad earlier that day at Cemetery Ridge, which was a hill above the stadium he had played football in. It was a military funeral, and the precision of the soldiers seemed right, a fitting tribute.

After the people had all filed through the line, we thanked the preacher, and the family went back to Grandmother's house. I sat beside her in the car ride over.

"That was right nice," she said. "All those people showing up. He would have liked that."

"Yes." Of course, I knew that he wouldn't have liked it, all the attention paid to him. That was what Grandmother liked, but I didn't say it because it didn't matter.

At the house, someone fixed coffee and we ate some of the food that people had been bringing over constantly for the last few days. Before I left for Beaverdam, I walked out with Dad to Granddad's old garden. We stood there in the half- light of dusk and smelled the magnolia. Little forms, bats perhaps, flitted above our heads.

"You know there were times when I hated him," he said after awhile. "He never once said he was proud of me. Even when I got into Med school. I wanted to hear that so bad."

"It was just his way."

"Yes. Maybe." I put my hand on his shoulder. He had been an all-state linebacker, but at this moment he felt slight, as though his skin was filled with air. His body sagged against mine.

"I see you kept up the garden." Globes of ripe tomatoes hung heavy on wire cages. A few rows of corn rasped in the breeze, and from somewhere above came the drone of an airplane.

"He always loved coming down here and working. I figured it was the least I could do . . ." All at once everything—the garden and the magnolia and behind a row of cedars— became sharply outlined in that last moment of failing light before the evening takes hold. After a few minutes, we turned back to the lighted house, the people who awaited us.

Later, I gave Sam a bath like I did every night. I knelt there on the hard bathroom tile and traced my hands over his soft body. I lathered up his hair and blew the bubbles off him so he would laugh. When he was all dry, I held him in my arms and whispered to him that I would always be there. But I knew that I was lying.

CHAPTER 8:

THE DISTANCES WEAR ON YOU

Garnell tells you lots of things you don't care to know—how sex with his wife is like sticking his dick in a big mass of pudding. Or that gunpowder rubbed on a pit bull's snout will enrage it so much that it becomes a death machine, a guided missile with teeth. He tells you about the terrible ways someone can get hurt in the joint: "They got this concoction called a Freddy Kreuger. Make it with Magic Shave and some other shit. It's like acid. I seen some sissy throw it on this guy was hassling him. Face just slides off like hot cheese on a pizza." He asks if you would "hit" any of the girls you drive past: "Look at the ass on her. You know you would be all up in that." You grin and smile sheepishly and tell him you are married. "Shit, so am I. Don't keep me from being human."

Later, at the end of a day hauling cheap furniture up and down the wobbly, defeated stairs of another apartment building, its terrible bouquet of piss and garbage, you almost welcome the reek of Garnell there beside you in the cab. He smokes one last cigarette and you feel the sweat drying on your brow and you are reminded that you took up smoking once in college for a period of one week. You brooded around the midnight campus, unfurling deep exhalations of smoke and agony like a fool, thinking the sensation of the mist from the fountain in front of the library so achingly ephemeral on your skin. Nothing at all, you know, like the feel of drying sweat.

The company's motto is "We'll get your stuff where you're going." After four years the guys all call you Professor. Some say it with a measure of respect. Others, lifers like Reuben, are

just looking for an opportunity to show you how smart you really are. “You want to carry this here piano like a man, Perfessor, or should we get the straps?” He smiles so you can see the gleam of his gold teeth; his eyes are hidden by Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses. He doesn’t look it, but he is stronger than any of you, except maybe Louis, who is Samoan and played football for a junior college somewhere in Missouri.

“All right,” you say. “Man up.”

“Yeah, *man up*, bitch.”

It’s Reuben’s catch phrase, but you use it now. You know what the challenge behind it means. Some guys can’t take this kind of work. They could be big as a Clydesdale, it doesn’t matter: man up when the time comes or let your partner down.

You’ve seen what Reuben can do, how he’ll make your life hell if you show the least bit of weakness. He hated Benny, in particular, a mealy boy with mutton chop sideburns who complained incessantly and disappeared when the heaviest furniture had to be lifted. Reuben taunted him ceaselessly.

“You ever lick pussy, B? ‘Cause when I get close to you that what I smell. I smell that ole fish pussy smell. But I know you never even dip a finger, so where that smell come from?”

“C’mon, lay off,” Benny says.

“I’m just saying you smell like pussy, and act like pussy, maybe you *is* pussy.”

Later on, while wrapping up a dresser in blankets, Benny makes his case to you: “I don’t know why he always got to be picking on me.” You just keep working, trying your best to stay out of it, but he wants so desperately to be consoled, for someone to take his side, almost,

you think, like your four year old son, who mewls in the irradiated darkness of a thunder storm. But Benny is a grown man, soft, torn, and fearful.

"He better watch hisself," Benny says. "One of these days."

Later in the afternoon, Benny loses his grip while carrying a wardrobe up a steep flight of stairs with Louis. Luckily, Louis wedges his massive shoulder underneath the bottom edge to keep from being knocked back down the stairs with the wardrobe tumbling on top of him.

"What I say?" Reuben comments to no one in particular. "Boy gone get someone killed."

Sometimes you are amazed that it has come to this—that you find yourself at seven in the morning punching in the security code to the office: your old basketball number from high school tripled. The repetition makes it even more pathetic.

You are the only one that the owner, Troy Spears, will trust not to rip off the place when he's not around. He has taken you aside into the office filled with boxes of paper and old weightlifting trophies to praise your "dedication," your "reliability."

"I know what I'm getting with most of these guys," Troy says as he strokes his yellow colored goatee. "Which is why I have so many rules. These guys could care less. But you're real find, John. A real find." Nausea grips you, a cloying feeling that sits in the center of your chest all day.

And later that week when the Indian convenience store magnate takes you by his side and says in a too loud voice, referring to Reuben and Garnell, and even Louis, "What will we do about these guys? You get them to work. I pay you good money," you want to say to him: "I'm just the same. I don't want to be here either. I'd chunk your fucking Stairmaster over the balcony

if I could." Instead, you grin and tell him you are all working very hard to make sure everything will make it safe and sound to his new mansion on the golf course in Fairfield Acres.

One morning Reuben is riding Benny again before you've even left the building and Benny is looking at Reuben with hatred, but you all know he won't lift a finger.

"C'mon," Reuben says. "Let's pump a little iron." He sits down at the weight bench, a castoff off from Troy's steroid days. There are mirrors and rows of dumbbells. Reuben puts two plates on each side—225 in all—and pumps the bar three times without even straining.

"Now you go, B. We need a warm-up."

Benny edges to the open backdoor where a few guys are smoking. He has a sulky, sour look on his face. He dons those glasses with the hazy lenses that always make the wearer seem guilty. "Shit, why I got to lift that?" He looks at you, then Louis, for support. Garnell lets out a strangled laugh. No one says a word. "I ain't got nothing to prove," Benny says. "Why you gotta be that way?"

"Cause I want to know what I'm working with. Do you have it in you?"

"Shee-it."

Louis gets up from one of the abandoned couches that populate the backroom. He motions to Reuben to move off the bench, then lifts the 225 five times. Now you all feel it; some line has been drawn. You take your place and bring the bar down across your chest. It sits there for a second, and then you haltingly get it up. When you are finished your arms feel rubbery and hot, but you are also strangely exultant.

"See, even the Perfessor can do it."

Benny seems most hurt that you have taken Reuben's side.

"Fuck all y'all. I don't need this job," Benny says. Then he starts muttering. "Big screen half paid off . . . let them come take it. I don't care."

At the same time, Reuben is crowing, "Go on then. Go on. You go. Call you momma to come pick you up. Go on."

The next morning a guy, some temp, is standing out front waiting for you to open up the place. He has on jeans, but shivers in the early morning cold.

"You ever done this kind of work before?" you say.

"Naw, man." He grins, showing a grill of chrome. "Another day, another dollar, right?" He won't last long, you think, but at least Benny is gone for good.

It is amazing what some people find dear. The wife of the convenience store magnate has hundreds of saris, cream and hunter and puce, bangled and stitched. She could never wear that many in a year if she wore a new one every day; some are encased in plastic, still smelling of India. All baggage that must be hauled around.

Like the old couple moving to Sun City. He had been a biology teacher. They have an entire room of their children's toys. You pick up a brittle sun-bleached plastic dolly, her blond hair now a tangle, one leering eye opened, the other drooped closed as if she is falling asleep. "Sometimes the grandkids come," the man says to you, knowing he can't really defend this silly nostalgia, this unnecessary burden on the moving van's precious space.

You find teething marks on the legs of dressers and bureaus. The indentions in the wood are soft. You like the feeling when you run your fingers over the ridges. In the closet or perhaps the pantry, you find the chart, the progression of childhood. Look how much he grew that one year. Even when the house is sold, they can never bear to paint over it. Leave it to the next

occupants to cover up, add their own hieroglyphs. You interpret the artifacts, follow the migrations, carry with your hands and shoulder the accumulation of a lifetime, however sad or superfluous.

Others are more haphazard and will just give you things, because they are the castoffs, the out of date and just plain ugly, the kind of stuff that makes them say, "What were we thinking?" This is where the couches in the shop's backroom come from: all golden harvest yellow or avocado green Naugahide and wrapped in duct tape to cover the scars made by some dog or rambunctious child. The pressboard dressers with crooked drawers like misshapen mouths. The forgotten exercise equipment: a bike that will take you nowhere, those red plastic weights filled with sand. And TVs all faux wood and heavy as hell, heavy as all your burdens. Reuben calls them "Sega specials." Sometimes after work you all sit around and play, hooting at the blips as if you were eighteen again without wives who have transformed into Jabba the Hut, without kids who should be medicated, without bills. In those last few minutes before you step out into the deep blank of another night, you sit and try to breathe in the lingering sweetness of late blooming honeysuckle coming from somewhere in the back lot; you try not to think at all.

Occasionally, the people can be ruthless, cutting to the bone, divesting what they loved most. You have more respect for this type, the ones who seem intent on what is to come, knowing they have to be light. The woman who tells you she wants to be sober when she sees her grandchild for the first time. Would you please just take away the contents of her bar? She doesn't care what you do with it, just get rid of it somehow. The collection is quite extensive—blackberry liquors and crème de menthes and Kahlúas—the exotic bottles tinted the color of an

alcoholic's rainbow. Garnell's eyes get as big as the Cheshire cat's. You select one bottle of single malt scotch, about half full, and tell him he can have the rest.

That night you come home to an empty house, because your wife has gone shopping at the outlet mall with her mother again. You sit down at the kitchen table, and before you even warm up some leftovers, you pour a glass. You pour several more glasses, and when you wife finally comes home, bags bunching and rustling around her, she finds you lying on your back on the bathroom floor, giggling. You can't stop, even when you see her reddening face peer down at you.

"What's wrong?" she keeps saying.

If you knew, you would tell her. You swear you would.

There is a specific way to pack a van. Kitchen chairs first, in the attic above the cab. Then the mattresses. The couch is turned up on end, feet against the wall.

After the couch you get the boxes. Then dressers and book cases, anything rectangular. It's like building a wall, layer by layer, intricate and perilous. One mistake and you have shifts, you have furniture rubbing and cracking.

Over the years, you've learned your lessons well. You pack it in tight.

*

There is one particular move, though, that you just can't get out of your mind. You must drive out to a little town called Between (the whole ride over Garnell asks you at consistent intervals, "Are we in Between, yet?") to help a woman move out of her daddy's house. "She's divorced," Teresa the secretary has confided that morning. "She finally has enough money to get

her own place. Just about cried when she called." When you get there, you can see why: her father is a real piece of work. In the front hallway, he has dedicated a giant glass case to his collection of Nazi memorabilia. On the walls are various weapons—maces, axes, swords, and daggers. Garnell stands gaping at a set of crossed swords.

"Them's for sticking, not cutting," the old man says, poking Garnell in the ribs with his index finger. Garnell smiles and laughs hesitantly.

"Just these two rooms," the woman says, asking in her harried smile to be forgiven for her father, for everything you would see and hear for the next few hours. You notice, then, a fragility that you find beautiful. You wish you could wrap her in soft tissue paper. Two children, a pale boy and girl, peer silently out at you from around a corner. You know how terrible this house is.

"This ole boy is bat shit crazy," Garnell says when you are in the basement to get the refrigerator. "What you bet he's putting it to her. Them kids look like all in the family, you know." You dislike Garnell at that moment.

"She seems nice. She's in a bad spot," you say.

"I bet you'd put her in a spot."

You tell Garnell to shut his mouth and for once he obliges.

*

At the end of every day, you go through a routine. Count the blankets and make sure they are stacked correctly, crease facing out. Count the thick rubber bands you use to hold the blankets in place. Troy will dock your pay if any of the numbers don't work out right. A blanket costs 35 dollars, or so he claims. Make sure the truck has gas, look at the oil dipstick. Write

down your mileage for the day. Everything ticked off on a check sheet. Everything accounted for.

The new house, a rental, is not much to speak of, but you can tell how happy the woman is to be there. She smiles in a different way, begins to ask you questions and joke around.

"You look like you are in shape," she says.

"Well, you know, the job . . ."

"I'd like to run in a marathon," she says. "Every day I try to run a little farther. But the distances wear on you."

You tell her that you used to run cross-country, so you know what she means. "Sometime, if you're lucky, your legs get numb. You're not even thinking about how long you've run, just pick a spot and make for it." She nods her head.

Finally, there is nothing left to move. Everything is in its place.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks. "Something to drink? Something for the road?"

You stand before her, immobilized by some need you can't acknowledge. "Yes, that would be nice," you say.

She smiles at you one last time and, for some reason, reaches out and smoothes your hair down as she would a child. Unconsciously you flinch and she looks embarrassed. "I'll go get that drink," she says and goes into the house

"Let's hit it," you say to Garnell, who is shaking his head and grinning.

"What's wrong with you?" he says.

Pulling out, you see her waving in your side mirror.

Later that night you fall asleep on the couch, hunched like a question mark. Even in your dreams you are lifting.

CHAPTER 9:

POSSESSIONS

We had to stay with my in-laws because the house was sold and the young couple who low-balled us on our asking price also wanted to move in before Christmas. They were just teenagers with pierced tongues and coffee-colored teeth that made me think meth right away. But we weren't in a much of a bargaining position because we had bills to pay and no one else had even made an offer. The bank could worry about the risk.

"You sure you're ready for this?" I said to Kate. "We're never coming back."

"Don't say it like that. Never say never. We have that land."

"That land is a fairy tale. Your grandmother owns that land. That land is never going to be yours to do with as you please. Can we have it clear cut, make a little money that we so desperately need?" Kate's silence was the answer.

"You don't have to be so nasty about my family."

"I'm just trying to be realistic."

Kate's parents live on the Saluda River in a neighborhood called Fond-Du-Loc, but it is not as fancy as it sounds. Just a few ranch houses in a circle. Railroad tracks cross the only entrance, and sometimes a line of box cars heading for a power plant farther up the river traps the residents for hours at a time. Another street, only wide enough for one car, bisects the circle. This street hasn't been paved in some time and there are no houses up here, only power lines and

a dirt path that kids come out from town to ride their four wheelers on. This was the land Kate's mother offered us with the condition we build a house. With the condition that we stay.

"You love me," I said. "You trust me that this is the right thing to do."

"Yes, I told you. It's hard, though. You understand that. Momma makes it hard."

"You grow up. You make your own way in the world." I saw it in her eyes though. I saw the hesitation.

While cleaning out my underwear drawer, I found my grandfather's tooth along with many odds and ends: a baseball card of Kate's brother when he was called up one year by the Brewers; a set of 1988 Olympic Silver Dollar coins given to me for Christmas by my Uncle Danny; watches with dead batteries that I never bothered to replace; a letter I never sent.

My grandfather gave the tooth to me at the Veteran's home. It fell out or he pulled it out, I don't remember. He's gone now, never to tell me exactly what should be done. What did he mean that day when he gave me this piece of himself, this broken remnant? The dried blood flecked off like bits of rust, sticking to my sweaty skin.

"What are you looking at?" Kate asked. She watched me intently from the doorway. The light silhouetted her figure. She has gained a few pounds over the years.

"It's nothing," I said.

We were walking. It was four days before Christmas, a day before I'll leave.
We stood up on the middle road looking down the wide clearing made by the Duke Power crews for the power lines. I could see all the way to the Saluda, meager and sluggish this time of year. Kate shivered, but I didn't offer my jacket.

"Do you see that little island there in the middle," she said. "Daddy used to take me out there in the canoe. One summer, I remember we camped out and made a fire. We caught a mess of bream. I never took you out there, did I?"

"No."

"What's wrong with you? You're acting strange."

"Nothing is wrong." Darkness was descending. I could hardly see Kate's face. She grabbed my hand. Somehow I never noticed how stubby her fingers were before that moment. They were raw and red, peasant hands. I squeezed and let go.

"There's Mama calling us for supper. I knew she'd be worried about me."

"I want to walk some more."

"You aren't going to do anything are you?"

What a strange thing for her to have said. Somehow she knew before I did. I shook my head, but she couldn't see me as I walked towards the river following the power lines.

"John." Her voice quivered, commanding and pleading at the same time. I kept walking.

The next morning, I called my boss at the moving company and said I wasn't coming in that morning. In fact, I was quitting, effective immediately.

"But we have a two truck move, and you're my only other driver, hoss."

"Not my problem, Troy."

"That's a kick in the teeth. You've always been a good worker. One of the best we've had. What gives?"

"It's complicated. I'm sorry," I said before hanging up.

I went back to bed and listened to everyone get ready for work. Near 8:00, Kate came down the hall and stood outside the door of the guest bedroom. She stuck her head in.

"I don't suppose you want to keep Sam, considering you're not going to work."

"Take him to daycare," I said. The thought of facing my son filled me with dread.

"Suit yourself," Kate said and closed the door loudly.

Then Sammy was there beside the bed. "You sick, Daddy?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm not feeling too great, sport." He looked at me with solemn eyes. How many times had he heard us argue? What did he know? I reached out to him, gave him a half wave. He stepped back a little. "You be good. I'll see you later." He nodded and came back to hug me. His nose touched my forehead, a spot of heat, and I held him there for as long as he'd let me.

I stayed in bed for another hour in that state of inertia that sometimes overtook me on the weekends when I let my normal waking hour go past, committing to neither sleep nor consciousness. It was like the semi-paralysis after surgery when the anesthesia is wearing off but the body still can't bring itself to move, as though you are covered with a lead blanket.

The odor of burning coffee and grease made its way into my dream haze; an unbidden hard-on began to stir. I hadn't had sex for months. Instead, I surfed the internet. The perfect, peach shaped asses; lean, smooth stomachs devoid of stretch marks; the taut muscle of a thigh; those lovely dimpled hip bones. It was my dream fugue—come hither smiles from collagen plumped lips. Every night I sat at the computer tense as a thief, always listening for the creak of the bed, the heavy steps.

I tried to think about other things, but my dick refused to co-operate. I knew that my father-in-law Randy had several trash bags stored in the basement filled with *Penthouses* from the early ‘80s. Lynette the staunch Baptist would have probably thrown him out of the house if she had an inkling of their existence.

I put on slippers and made my way down the hallway; the dark paneling and thick powder blue shag carpet was depressing as usual. I swore I could almost hear my hard-on throb. The basement was very large, and Randy had, at one time, envisioned turning it into a game room. But the impulse had now been long forgotten. Only a skeletal framework of studs hinted at some sense of potentiality. A toilet sat against one of the walls occasionally making slurping sounds; I was warned not to use it the first time I came to visit. The only reminder of Randy’s project was a pool table covered with cobwebs, the green felt already spotted with mold. I lamented that such a beautiful table—a Mayuchi no less—could be so neglected. Just like everything else they had, gone to pot.

In the basement, I faced most of our stuff. Lynette and Randy offered to store everything until we were ready to move. It was all down here, the accumulated furniture and ephemera of six years of marriage: the bed bought on sale at Badcock’s; the kitchen table I sanded and finished myself; the mahogany colored leather couch I loved; the La-Z-Boy I slept through the night on occasionally, not wanting to face Kate’s disappointment; the boxes of books, mine mostly dense, academic, to be looked at with puzzled awe when visitors came by, hers mostly romance novels; the china settings we received as wedding presents but never used; mismatched towels and sheets; the fake Christmas tree that no longer fit in its box; the shoes and clothes that had never been worn, tags still clinging to them like accusations. It was all down there beside an

antique crib and the bed that Kate's grandfather died in. That morning, it weighed on me, the meaningless stuff that represented my life. It didn't add up to anything I wanted to keep.

I had granddad's tooth in my pocket as Kate drove me over to my parents' house. We settled into a strained silence. The sky and trees were blurred gray. A snow storm was threatening and I silently wished it would come, white powder to cover everything up. Frozen pastureland. A barbed wire fence glittered with a rim of icy teeth. I usually got carsick when I looked out the window for too long, but it didn't seem to matter. I let the headache come.

There was a small suitcase in the backseat containing enough clothes to last a week. The rest was packed and ready to be moved to an apartment in Decatur. We were supposed to be starting a new life.

My breath condensed on the cold window, and I traced my initials in cursive just as I did on so many school buses in so many different towns when I was a kid.

"So, you're just going to ignore me?" she said.

I shrugged, not wanting to look at her. "What do you want me to say?"

"When he asks me, I'll tell him that you left. You walked out. You're the one responsible for all of this."

Kate slowed the car down as we came to a four way stop. I looked at her.

"Yes, I'm responsible. I acknowledged that something had to change, at least. But you can paint it however you like. You usually do."

"Quitter."

"All right."

A car came up behind and honked loudly, startling us both.

"Well, go on," I said. She just glared straight ahead before finally accelerating. The tires spun on an icy patch, and the car lurched sideways for a moment before catching solid pavement and jerking forward with a screech. She took her foot off the gas and started to cry.

"Go ahead. Just go," I said. Her face was raw and bloated, and I turned away because I couldn't look at her, didn't want to feel the tug of sympathy.

When we got there, I still didn't look at her. I didn't say a word. At the door, I heard her scream, jagged and resentful in its sadness. I closed the door softly. "I'm back," I said, though no one was there to hear me.

We spent most nights watching the History Channel or *Law and Order*. *Law and Order* was Mom's preference. She complained that the History Channel should be called the "Hitler Channel," but Dad and I were mesmerized by the grainy footage of rumbling tanks and slowly cascading bombs. Dad wondered why commercials were so much louder than the regular programming. They tried their best not to prod, not to say the words "separation" or "divorce." Still, I could tell that they were secretly happy about the turn of events.

"We love you," Mom said. "And are glad to have you back." She also said, "You know, we are very proud of you."

"Proud of what?"

"Well," she said in a measured tone, "of the man you've become."

I wanted to tell her that I had no sense of who that man was. But I just nodded and hugged her, my mother who loved me.

One night I went into town and got drunk with Dieter Dolezol, one of the professors who approved my master's thesis. He was in his fifties and had a shaggy bowl of hair as black and shiny as crow's feathers. Though he was happily married, when he found out that I was considering leaving my wife, he lifted up his green bottle of Pilsner and proclaimed, "Emancipation for the soul in bondage" to the whole bar.

"Thanks for the support, Dieter."

"Whatever you need. A place to stay, help moving your stuff. I even volunteer to be your—What do the kids say?—be your wing man for the night."

"I'm sure that would go over well," I said, imagining Dieter, who looked like a medieval monk as envisioned by Monty Python's Flying Circus, chatting up some sun-bronzed sorority girl. "Maybe help moving some stuff. That would be great."

Dieter began humming Aretha Franklin's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T."

"This is an exciting new phase in your life, John. You'll see. Women are often an encumbrance to true thought. The great men are solitary in their hearts."

"You really said that."

"I don't know. Maybe."

After 2am, we wandered back to Dieter's house, which was only a few blocks off College Avenue. I could have made it home if I focused, but Dieter was in no condition to walk fifty yards without assistance. He continued to belt his way through the Aretha canon, occasionally punctuating a verse with "Freedom." I struggled to find the keys to the house in Dieter's overstuffed pocket.

"What is this, twine? Who carries around twine?"

"Twine is underrated. It's very useful."

After finally extracting the keys and opening the front door, I led Dieter down the hall, holding his hand like a child. The lights were on in the bedroom. Jane, Dieter's wife, was up reading a novel.

"Y'all certainly tied one on," she said without a trace of judgment. In my few encounters with her, I had found Jane a graceful lady with just the right mix of southern charm and ironic understatement. Dieter had married well, I decided. "I'll take it from here," she said. "You go on and sleep anywhere you like, but the couch in the study is pretty comfy."

Suddenly I was very tired, and I made my way to the bathroom. I splashed some water on my face and looked in the mirror, noticing, for the first time in a long while, the crescent shaped scar just below my Adam's apple. It was faint after ten years—just a slight indention, a ridge of caved-in flesh where the thyroid should be. Removed the summer before I met Kate. I was so brave. Or perhaps just stupid and naïve. I couldn't decide now.

In the hospital, after being dosed with radiation, I sat on the crinkly plastic sheets, the kind reserved for incontinent patients, and looked at the squares of sunlight moving across the floor; I couldn't concentrate to read or even watch television. The doctor had gone to great lengths to remind me that anything that came out of my body was radioactive and would have to be cleaned up with care. I thought of the cross stitched message above my grandmother's commode: Please be neat and wipe the seat. Then there was the pill. The doctor wore heavy gloves to take it out of a lead thermos with tongs.

In the mornings, the hospital coffee stank like charred flesh. I dumped it down the sink to keep from throwing up. No one could visit, and even the nurses stayed away. I tried to get used to the loneliness, the confinement.

Later they did scans of my neck to make sure all the cancer was gone. I was put in a dark room with some contraption, a fancy x-ray machine, only inches away from my face. Despite being buried in blankets, I was still cold. During these times, I recreated my life, imagined myself burying the corner jumper to win the game, dating all the girls I never had the courage even to talk to. Perhaps this is when the idea of Kate began to bloom.

And I made it through fine—the operation, the three doses of radiation, the numerous and lengthy scans all unmitigated successes. "You are young and strong," the surgeon said. "No worries." And I believed him. The oncologist looked like the picture of Ralph Waldo Emerson inside my American Lit Survey textbook: stern and wise, but a little hard, a little distant, his nose a scimitar cutting the air as he nodded. He glanced at the figures in front of him, shook his head, saying, "A remarkable recovery. You are a very lucky young man." What else was he hoping for?

In the fall, pale and still a little shaky from the last round of radiation, I went to submit some poems at the college literary magazine, *Nevermore.* Dressed in cut off jeans, Birkenstocks, and a ridiculous tie-dyed shirt emblazoned with a pink peace sign. I burned that shirt. The editor, who had a mane of flaming red hair, looked at me a little askance but carefully read through the poems, occasionally making an encouraging comment. Before I left, somehow I asked her on a date, and she said yes.

All that had metastasized. Just a spot on an x-ray that needed to be handled with care and precision.

I went over to Richton to meet with a lawyer, a hunting buddy of my father's named Lew Grizzle. He repeatedly told me "Listen," as if I were a child who wasn't paying enough attention.

"Now listen. I'm not going to lie to you—the courts invariably favor the woman. So if you were doing anything you shouldn't have, you need to tell me. Because we are fighting an uphill battle as it is. I don't like surprises. It's like finding a dog turd on the carpet when you come home from work."

I shook my head. "No woman," I said. "Just a letter I wrote once."

"What letter?" He was suddenly interested. "To who? Do you have it in your possession?"

"It's nothing important." I did not want to admit that I wrote this letter to a woman I hardly knew. A woman who once touched me on the brow. Just the tip of one finger carefully brushing hair out of my eyes, stunning me for that moment.

"So you have it in your possession?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then it is not a problem. Now on to financial matters."

"There isn't much to fight over. The only thing that matters is seeing Sam. I don't really care about money or even the furniture."

"Listen, you may be ready to give everything away, but I'm not. We are gonna get what you deserve." The lawyer was probably right to be so adamant, but I still didn't like him very much.

"And no women," he said. "Even a platonic little chat over coffee can get you in trouble here. Are you with me?" I automatically nodded my head. It was reassuring to be told what to do.

Before I left, a paralegal gave me little booklet called *Some Advice for Divorced Dads*. Reading it through later that evening, I came upon this passage: "Forging and maintaining a viable, meaningful parent-child relationship through visitation is often like building a functional beach house using popsicle sticks, wet sand, and duct tape."

Sitting on the double bed my mother had bought to replace my old bunk beds, I summoned my courage up to call Kate. I had ignored her calls for weeks. Suddenly, I realized how much the room had been changed. I missed the nautical themed curtains with anchors, men-of-war, and pirates. I wondered what my mother had done with my poster of a manic Jimi Hendrix setting his guitar on fire. Ancient history. Kate answered the phone. She was not happy.

"I'd like to see Sammy."

"Well, he doesn't want to see you. He's very mad at you right now."

"I find that hard to believe."

"So you think you can just walk out, ignore my calls for weeks, and, just like that, you want to be a father again? Let me tell you, asshole, I'm not playing that game."

"You are playing some kind of game here. I have rights. I have a lawyer."

"Rights? You don't have shit. I have a lawyer, too. And he thinks you don't have a leg to stand on. I'm going get what I want."

"What is there to get?" I felt a headache coming on. I tried very hard, I wanted to say. But the phone line clicked and I was left with my mouth moving. I had no answers.

After New Years, I got ready to move into the apartment I had leased outside of Decatur, near the university where I would be teaching. The apartment was too large and I didn't know how I would pay the rent, but I liked the idea of solitude.

I went out with my father to look through some of the furniture my Grandmother had left in storage after moving to a retirement community. Dad told me how bitterly she fought to retain as much of her former life as possible, arguing over the smallest possession.

"We won't let her know you have any of this. She'd probably want it back at some point. She may be my mother, but she's a total Indian giver."

"Look at all this shit," I said. "And you say this is just the bare minimum she'd leave behind?"

"I've never seen a hearse dragging a u-haul, but when your grandmother dies . . ."

We sifted through heavy boxes of musty *National Geographic*s. In one corner, I found a crate packed with tureens shaped like chickens. She also collected several antique sewing machines and ornate grandfather clocks. We rescued a pistachio green couch, a book shelf, and a roll top desk that had been my Grandfather's. Dad was sweating now in the morning cold. His breath was a cone of hoar frost that became a squiggle drifting up into brightness. I could tell he had something on his mind because his hands fidgeted, as if they didn't know where to go. Finally, one came to rest on my shoulder.

"So," he began, "I went over to Cemetery Ridge the other day to visit your granddad's grave. It's nice, you know, up there, though all the leaves have fallen." He looked off into the distance like he was trying not to cry. I patted him on the shoulder. "I got to thinking about how unhappy he probably was. The man you knew was not the man I grew up with. I guess I never could understand that unhappiness, how it seemed to just sit there inside him like a ticking bomb.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I never wanted to be him, and I don't want it for you either."

These were more words than we had shared in years.

"It's hard," I said. "Sometimes I feel like I'm a ghost haunting myself."

"I know. I know exactly."

CHAPTER 10:

FIRST TASTE

The first was Dulce. She sat behind me in Ms. Spence's class and I remember turning around and looking into her brown, luminous eyes. They drank me in with a terrible thirst. She talked very slow and precise, because she was still uncertain of her English. In the afternoons after school, we both stood in line waiting for the busses. I lived in Harker Heights, a suburb far away, so I had a long ride ahead of me. I knew she lived somewhere near downtown in one of those narrow, riotously painted houses that looked like it was about to teeter off its concrete foundation at any moment. She never said much about her family except that they had come from Mexico City and used to live in a nicer house. They had a wall and a little garden with a courtyard. "You break bottles and lay them on top of the wall to keep the bad people out," she said.

We held hands sometimes while we stood there waiting. Her bus was always first, and she would wave at me from the back window looking so sad and lonely. Her arm moved stiffly back and forth like she was one of those mechanized people in Disney World. I've seen that look since, and I always think of Dulce. She gave me my first taste of longing. Maybe it's a drug and you're always hoping the kick will be like the first time. But it never is.

Sometimes in rebellion against the after school program my mother had enrolled me in, I would ride the bus all the way back home and stay over at the Merrit house until dinner time. Jay

and Michael were twins, but they didn't look anything alike. Fraternal. Jay was stocky and smelled like a fart. Michael had long eyelashes, orange hair and freckles. They were a few years older and Jay didn't really want to have much to do with me unless it was to put me in the various holds of the professional wrestlers he admired—he would eviscerate me with the Macho Man Randy Savage's Flying Elbow Drop, choke me half to death with Sgt. Slaughter's Cobra Clutch. Then he would lose interest as I lay on the floor panting. Michael, on the other hand, tolerated me because he was strange and had no other friends. Their mother had a job working for H&R Block and their dad was an MP out at the base, so they were latch key kids. Those afternoons we would roam through the house, with Michael revealing its secrets.

"See this?" He held up what looked to be a black plastic stick rounded at the end. We had been digging in a closet looking for Mouse Trap. "What do you think it is?"

I had no idea, but didn't want to appear ignorant. "I don't feel like saying."

"You ain't got a clue," he said, laughing. "It's a baton."

"What do you do with it?"

"Man, you ask too many questions. You don't know anything."

"Maybe you don't know either."

"All right, if you want to be dense. You crack skulls with it. Pow." He slapped the club in the palm of his hand. "It was my grandfather's. He invented a new kind for the police. See this hole at the end? You spray out tear gas in the face of any scum that's hassling you."

I had to admit this was pretty impressive.

"If you can keep your mouth shut about it, I'll show you something even weirder."

He pinky-sweared me to secrecy and we went into his parent's bedroom. There were clothes all over the floor and the bed was unmade. The only thing that wasn't a mess was a

uniform hanging from the door to the bathroom. It was so immaculate and stiff it looked like it could jump down and walk away by itself. I felt awkward being there, like I was looking at my own parents' room. Michael was rummaging around in the bedside table. Everything stunk of Old Spice and tangerines. Funny how distinct and awful everybody else's house smells.

"Check this out." He had what looked like another baton in his hand, only it was shorter, blue, and curved like a bullet at one end. "You don't know what it is so don't even pretend." He clicked something at the base and it began to hum. Michael just kept looking at me and smirking. Finally, he said, "I knew you never seen a dildo before."

"All right, what's it for?"

"Women stick it between their legs."

"Why?"

At this question the limits of Michael's knowledge seemed to have been reached. He looked uneasy. "Don't be a douchebag. Remember you swore."

Mom always liked for us to sit down at the table to eat dinner. Sometimes Dad would be home and sometimes he didn't show up until late, well past my bedtime. I heard them, the hushed voices full of some unknown tension. Shadows moved back and forth across the border of light under my door. Once I got up to pee and found Dad sitting on the toilet; he was asleep, clothes in disarray. A particular gaminess clung to him that I didn't recognize until years later.

Regardless of Dad, Mom had dinner on the table at six every night and I knew I better be there. We'd sit down and say Grace and she would ask me about my day and I'd try to say something nice, something that would reassure her. Usually it was a lie, because I didn't want

her to know exactly what I was doing. They weren't big lies or even necessary lies. It was, somehow, just the easiest thing to do.

My teacher cast me as Bambi in the school play and Mom got all excited. She made an elaborate costume which included some plush, suede antlers and a furry vest. Dad was uncomfortable about the whole thing. He sat there on the couch and watched Mom fuss and fret, sticking pins here and there, adjusting the antlers. "They look real, don't they?" she mused. "Should they be stiffer?"

"He looks like a fucking fairy," Dad said.

"He'll be a hit. You wait. They'll eat him up he's so cute." And Mom was right. I stood there on the stage at the end of the show and I could feel the people looking at me. They clapped and cheered. I felt I could hear the little girls' hearts palpitating. This was the first time I realized I had that power.

My best friend at school was Kenny Nguyen. He lived with his grandfather in a monstrous Victorian looking house near the downtown. It was totally unlike any of the houses in Harker Heights which were mostly an ugly brown ranch style. Kenny's parents stayed in Fort Worth working for some computer company, so he was alone a lot. His grandfather looked like the old master in *Kung Fu* and he had these tanks of tropical fish he was continually feeding. I liked to look at the fish. Fish are soothing. They just float around with nothing to do. They're trapped but they don't seem to know it. Once, out of nowhere, Kenny's grandfather pointed to one, some crazy looking thing dark as ink with fins jutting everywhere like branches from a tree and said, "De-ricate. Berry de-ricate. Must be careful. They die. Ex-pensive."

Dad had to come pick me up from Kenny's and he wasn't too happy about it. He gave a hard look at Kenny as I got in.

"That's your friend?" he said.

"Yeah." We didn't say another word the whole ride home; I could tell he had something on his mind. Finally, in the drive way, he turned to look at me.

"Why don't you just play with kids in the neighborhood?"

"I do. But I like Kenny."

"Well, I missed an important meeting to come all the way out to get you."

At dinner, Dad called Kenny my little sand nigger buddy. "Just like the people we bought this house from. You can still smell the damn curry after all these months."

Mom looked up at the ceiling fan. "That's not very nice. It's rude and ignorant."

"Excuse me." He leaned back in his chair. "I'm an ass. I know."

We kept eating, and I counted my chews and crushed the peas into a paste with my fork until Dad finally said, "You better eat that," and pushed back from the table.

One day in the summer I opened the front door and found a copperhead on the mat. I went to the garage to get my b-b gun and then stole around the corner of the house. The grass was seared and yellow because we had no trees for shade. Blue tin foil dragonflies surfed on waves of heat and the sun was so brilliant I had to cup my hand over my eyes to see the snoozing copperhead. He looked as benign as a coiled hose. I could have thrown a rock at him, chased him off, but I wanted to kill him. I aimed for the sleek tapered head. After the first b-b the snake rolled spastically. Two more and it was just a dead thing. The head was split in two, barely

hanging by a strand of gristle. I took it to the back yard, gutted out the hard slick gray tube of flesh and nailed the skin to the back fence. It stayed there all year, getting dry and crinkly like some kind of parchment.

The cave looked like it had been inhabited by bums at some point, because there was a piece of carpet on the floor along with some empty cans of Wolf Chile, the kind that made Dad sweat pour like a faucet. A long beam of light from an opening above shone down on the middle of the tannish, filthy carpet. Michael went to a corner and came back with a dog eared magazine. The pages were slightly damp and hard to peel back without tearing.

"You ever see a naked woman?"

I'd never looked at a magazine like this, but knew Dad had stacks of them in his workshop. One woman wore a gray fur coat and nothing else. She was leaning back on a couch, her eyes closed, a half-smile on her lips. What was she thinking about? Was she happy to be there, looking up at me? Her breasts were a slope ending in sharp pink nipples pointed at me like the barrels of guns. But I was most amazed by the dark canyon between her legs. That was where Michael's mother put her dildo. That was the hidden universe I couldn't look away from.

"What do you think? Pretty gross, huh?" Michael said.

I nodded, but didn't t reply. My hands were shaking.

Recesses on the swing set Dulce and I flew up into the afternoon sun, stretching our toes out to the pleasant heat. We flung our bodies like pendulums.

"Hold my hand," she said once and we caught hold of each other, bobbing slightly askew before we found the rhythm. "Now, jump," she said at the apex of our kick and we catapulted

out. At some point I let go. We rolled, the dirt coating our sweat-slick bodies. She wiped a mustache of dirt from my lip and glanced down in her shy, graceful way. I do not think I will ever see such a look again.

There was this girl named Angie at after school who would follow me around. She was a little pudgy, and she wasn't much to look at, but her lips were plump and unchaste. She was always hanging there on the periphery, eyeing me as I ran by. She stood in doorways and wouldn't let me pass.

"Where you going?" she'd say. "Can I come?"

"Sure. Whatever." I didn't give her much thought.

Then one day, we stood there, and her mouth was quivering. "Why don't you like me?" Her lips were painted with gloss and I suddenly understood what I could do and kissed her. Her tongue was in my mouth, desirous of something. They always think that they are taking.

"So you're not a faggot after all," Dad said. He stood in the doorway to the workshop, the sun behind him making his face an inscrutable shadow. I was hunched by his plywood bookcase, the evidence of my heterosexuality still in my hand, an issue of *Oui*. "That's something, at least."

Later that week I came down with shingles and was miserable. For some reason, he took me to see a Clint Eastwood western. I didn't pay attention because I was in so much pain, but occasionally I would look over and see how much Dad was enjoying Clint riding around the desert shooting everyone.

"Now that's a man," he said on the way home. "But you can't be a cowboy anymore, no sir." He had a far off look as though he was still out there with Clint, feeling the horse under him

and the hard tendrils of dust scraping his face, the horizon beckoning. “You can’t have that kind of freedom,” he continued. “And the thing is—we let it happen.”

I was confused but I kept quiet. I sensed he was trying to impart some lesson that I was only just starting to comprehend.

“They want our soul; they want our balls to display up on a shelf like a trophy and we just offer them up. Never give them the satisfaction,” he said.

Dulce was the first girl whose heart I broke. “Why would you kiss her?” she wailed. “That ugly, ugly puta.”

I shrugged. I didn’t really know. Because she wanted me to.

“Do you think I’m going to kiss you now?”

“If you feel like it.”

“You think I’m like her, a slut?” Dulce’s brown eyes were full of fury. I had disabused her about the purity of love. Her devotion couldn’t compete with Angie’s wet tongue.

That afternoon I watched her face in the bus window. Such exquisite pain. She was trapped. But she knew it now. I had taught her.

CHAPTER 11:

THE SPEED OF LIGHT

When Fae came home for Christmas with a car full of odds and ends, including the Falstaff clock her Granny Bernice stole from a bar in the French Quarter, Ma suspected that something was afoot.

"That's the tackiest thing," she commented as they sifted through the boxes. "I suppose Jeff finally decided he'd had enough of it."

The Falstaff man all dressed in motley, his red cheeks shining with mirth, smiled unsuspectingly from the bottom of the trunk. Fae picked up the clock and cradled it as she would a sickly child.

"No, Jeff likes it. He thinks it's kitschy."

The clock, too hideous and wonderful to ignore, never failed to draw a comment from any visitor to their apartment in Decatur. Mechanized plastic beer steins clacked the seconds, and the rim was a neon tube with bubbles rioting in the seedy orange glow. And of course the likeness of the jolly Falstaff man. Fae loved the clock the moment she saw it.

"It's my inheritance," she said. "The only thing I have left that reminds me of Granny."

"Oh that woman. She was a mess."

"I guess schizophrenia will do that to you."

"You have no idea what it was like growing up in that house. It's amazing that Mamie and me made it out alive."

"Well, anyway," Fae said, still hugging the clock, "I'm not sure if I trust the aesthetic judgments of a woman who hangs *Gone with the Wind* plates on her wall."

"Poo. Put that down and come give me a hug. I'm so glad to see you." Ma smelled of perspiration and Ben Gay. She smelled like an old woman.

Fae was the only child of her parents' second marriage—they had six kids between them from their previous marriages. Fae came in her mother's forty-fourth year, an unexpected surprise. Many of her nieces and nephews were close to her same age. When Fae was trying to be ironic about her country ways in front of Jeff's drinking buddies from the university, she called her family the redneck Brady Bunch.

"You're shrinking, Ma."

"No, it's just bad posture. I don't stand up straight like I used to. I'm a sloucher now."

A loud crack reverberated out past the wilted cane that formed the right hand border of the yard.

"There's your Pa off shooting with the boys. They come over ever once in while to visit *their* inheritance." That inheritance, Fae knew, was an M-1 rifle her father had restored and promised to her brother Roy's sons. They would visit their gun several times a week, and Pa delighted in taking them to shoot up the surrounding pine trees, though Fae felt her father to be a fairly poor shot. She had once seen him unload a whole chamber of a .45 on a copperhead without success, finally resorting to clubbing it to death with a tree limb. He had also accidentally blown off the tip of a pinkie while in Korea.

"So I guess Jeff couldn't make it?" Ma was nonchalant as they hauled the last of Fae's stuff (an Atari and a box of audio cassettes) into the house. It was not unusual that Jeff wasn't there because he had long ago proclaimed his distaste for her family, calling them ignorant

crackers. The fact that Jeff's parents just owned a dairy farm down the road in Erata never stopped him from being high-handed. Once, Jeff had even gotten into a brawl with Roy after Jeff christened George W. Bush "our first retarded president" at a Fourth of July picnic. They knocked over a platter of deviled eggs and rolled around on the grass for a few minutes before Fae's niece Whitney dumped a pitcher of tea over them. Ma stood with her hand over her mouth, and Fae brooded behind the crowd of kin. That was the last time Jeff made an appearance at a family gathering. If they visited, he would spend every minute locked away in Fae's old room, now basically a large storage closet outfitted with an air mattress for them to sleep on. He read science fiction novels and drank vodka straight from the bottle.

"I'll be honest, Ma. I'm leaving him. I've already signed a lease for a place, but I can't move in until January. I just brought this stuff because I didn't want him trying to hide it somewhere. I mean, it's *mine*."

"Well, honey, I guess some things aren't meant to last. Lord knows your father and I don't have any room to be judgmental." Fae had her suspicions about how her parents met, but all Ma would say was, "I wasn't always a good girl."

Holding the box of cassettes, which mostly consisted of the hair metal bands she worshipped in high school and still sometimes listened to while driving in Atlanta traffic—another embarrassing flaw in her taste that Jeff liked to deride—Fae felt like breaking down and crying, but she reminded herself that she wasn't going to waste any more emotion on Jeff; she vowed before she left that she wouldn't burden anyone in her family with the details of her dying marriage.

"Just do me a favor, Ma." She was trying to control the quavering tone that was creeping into her voice. "Let me tell Charlene, okay? I know she'll have something to say, and I don't want to be blindsided."

Charlene was Fae's oldest sister. She was a high school principal down in Pass Christian and had the ability to diminish Fae in the guise of honest critique. If they went shopping, Charlene observed that she didn't have the boobs to pull off a low cut dress. When Fae received her Master's in Special Education from Mississippi State, Charlene pointed out that Southern Miss's program was more highly regarded.

"All right, mum's the word. You just do whatever you like. I'd better get supper started. There's coffee if you want some."

Ma shuffled off to the kitchen and presently began to rattle pots and pans around as though an army of cooks had invaded the house. Fae slowly unpacked her clothes and took out a hair dryer to inflate the air mattress. She heard her father come in and ask "Where's Chicken?" Chicken was the nickname he had given her when she was five and would parade half naked around the yard with a line of chicks in tow. Now that she was a teacher, he'd taken to calling her Professor Chicken.

"Back yonder. You leave her alone until dinner."

"Well, if that don't beat all," Pa said and lit a cigarette. He was still smoking even after the doctor had lectured him about how bad it was for Ma's asthma.

The sound of some news program, probably CNN, began blaring.

"Why do you always have to turn it so loud? Can't hardly think."

"You're used to it," Pa retorted.

Fae half listened to her parents bicker as she fiddled with the mattress's valve. She happened to look up at the ceiling and notice the planet and star decals she had stuck there as a teenager. That was the summer Fae turned thirteen and she fell into an affair with a married man. Now she could hardly remember much about the man, or what attracted her to him, except that he had sported a thick mustache in an attempt to look like Tom Selleck on *Magnum PI*. After her parents became aware of the situation, Fae spent a year confined to her room, only leaving the house to go to school. She spent so much time in her room reading, or often just lying in bed thinking about the man she could no longer see, she put the fluorescent stars on the ceiling so she could imagine, at least sometimes when she was particularly miserable, that she was back in that field, the cold dew bathing her skin and the universe winking at her sins.

Now at age thirty-three she was back again. She turned off the lights and lay down. What would the universe say now?

Fae's dad, who everybody called Ray though his given name was Curtis, had often reminded her that when she turned eighteen it would be time to "break her plate," meaning she was on her own. Along with his earlier threat from childhood that he would whip her with rusty barbed wire if she got out of line, Fae took her father at his word. She worked, first throughout high school as a hostess and cashier at a Western Sizzlin, then in college at a Blockbuster Video. As valedictorian of the tiny twenty-seven-member senior class of Slab Town Prep, she received a full scholarship, but she still had to pay for rent, food, and insurance on her newly purchased car.

With work and school, she hardly had time to breathe, but somehow after her junior year at MSU she found herself engaged to a boy from home whose greatest ambition in life was to get on an oil rig like his brother and father and smoke a good deal of pot, not necessarily in that

order. When the boy, whose name was Chance Roper, was finally busted for possession with intent to distribute, Fae realized she had no feelings for him outside of pity.

At some point after Chance and a series of other equally uninspiring boyfriends, Fae came to the conclusion that she was not meant to find a man who would set her heart aflutter, so she settled on finding one who she could tolerate. While auditing a seminar on Elizabethan Drama just for fun, she made friends with several of the English grad students. She began to spend a few evenings a week hanging out at a dive called Dark Horse with her new friends, eventually meeting Jeff one night when he came in with the Hughey twins, Ed and Andy. Fae knew them from their series of misadventures back in Slab Town that had culminated in a terrible motorcycle accident which left Ed without half of his left leg. This did, at least, have the unintended benefit of finally making it possible to tell the two apart. Now everyone knew—one leg, one syllable.

The twins were happy to see someone from home and introduced Jeff as a cool guy from Erata, another farming community only about fifteen miles away from Slab Town. Wasn't it funny that they never met in high school? After more than a few shots of tequila, they moved on to the twins' apartment on Jackson Street where the night culminated in Fae challenging Jeff to an arm wrestling contest, while Ed and Andy punched each other in the shoulder to see who was the toughest, or perhaps who was the drunkest. Waking up in the morning with the worst hangover of her life, Fae found that someone had laid her on the couch and even tucked her in with a rancid afghan. Her last lucid memory had been leaning her forehead on the clammy reeking porcelain of Ed and Andy's toilet.

"I need coffee," Fae said to no one in particular as she got up, her head still spinning a little. The twins lay spread eagled on the floor, naked except for boxers; patches of their chests

and arms were already a mottled purplish-blue as if they had been shot by paint pellets. Ed was using his prosthesis as a pillow. Fae heard the toilet flush, and Jeff staggered out and sat down beside the couch.

"Who won our arm wrestling contest?" he wondered.

"I really can't remember."

"Good. We'll call it a draw."

They sat there quietly, gathering themselves to move.

"You want to get some breakfast?" Jeff cocked his eyebrow and turned his head, reminding Fae of the silly, questioning look her Uncle Hickey Boy's Labrador retriever would give her whenever she failed to throw the tennis ball he had just laid at her feet. Fae laughed.

"I'd love some coffee, at least."

"That can be arranged."

They made it to the Waffle House by leaning on each other and walking very slowly. The waitress winked when she took their order

"Y'all had a rough night, huh?" She had seen her fair share of hung over college students.

After drinking some coffee and eating two orders of hash browns and scrambled eggs, they talked. Fae found out that Jeff was in the English department like her friends and was in the middle of writing his thesis on *Gravity's Rainbow*.

"Oh, I love Pyn-chin."

"It's pronounced Pyn-chaun, actually. He comes from one of those old Massachusetts families, you know, like Hawthorne."

"Really," Fae said.

After seeing him a few more times at Dark Horse, Fae decided that Jeff might be acceptable. He seemed very smart and shared her desire to get away from Mississippi as soon as possible. And, though she never asked him, Fae assumed Jeff had been the one who picked her up from the toilet and put the afghan over her. That was a considerate act, at least, which was really all she could hope to get from a man. Just a little kindness and respect.

A year later, after finishing her first year in grad school, Fae asked Jeff to move in with her, but he refused. Jeff was a traditionalist when it came to this one issue.

"We have to get married. I couldn't face my parents if we were just living together. I mean, they would be so disappointed. It would literally kill my mother."

"Well, she doesn't have to know about it, then," Fae suggested.

"No dice. I can't do it. We have to get married."

So, in lieu of a proposal, Jeff made a pronouncement, one that Fae was not entirely ready for, but one that she finally accepted a week later. "People from Erata are peculiar," Ma reminded her before the wedding, but Fae decided to go through with it anyway.

Events leading up to and after the wedding made her wonder if perhaps she was making a mistake. The first concern revolved around whether Fae would change her last name or hyphenate it. Jeff claimed he didn't care what she did, but when she told him she had decided to go with Bigby-Pruitt, he wondered why his name wasn't first.

"I guess Bigby-Pruitt sounds a little better. It rolls off the tongue better than Pruitt-Bigby, anyway."

"Whatever. Sounds like a law firm either way."

"So what should I do?"

"It doesn't matter."

Hearing the petulance in Jeff's voice, Fae realized she had no desire to argue about something so silly. If she was honest, she did not feel strongly about keeping her name. It was just a nod at some vaguely felt feminist ideals. She decided to give in and take Jeff's last name.

The second problem was more portentous. In order to get a marriage license, the state of Mississippi in its infinite wisdom required both parties to submit to a blood test to check for any communicable diseases. So Fae visited the Jones County Department of Health to shed the prerequisite vial of blood and then returned a week later for the results that would allow her to pick up the marriage license. The wedding was to take place in five days at the New Zion Baptist Church in Erata. However, when Fae stood before the wizened little man smiling cheerfully in the window, he informed her that she couldn't get married.

"What? Why?" she said and stopped fumbling with her checkbook.

"Well, young lady," the man said, seeming to relish this bit of excitement in his usually hum-drum routine, "because you have syphilis."

"The hell I do!" Fae thrust her face through the old man's invisible barrier of superiority. Shrinking back from her, he looked over his shoulder helplessly.

"You *will* test me again," Fae said in a scarily even tone. "And I'm not paying another twenty dollars, you hear me?"

"Yes M'am. Mistakes do happen." The man mumbled under his breath, defeated.

The preacher turned out to be a harder nut to crack. He was insistent that he had to have a valid Mississippi marriage license before he would marry anyone, let alone someone who may or may not have a disease that ranked only second in his mind behind leprosy. Jesus even cured the lepers, but the preacher wasn't so sure he could remember Jesus curing a syphilitic. And hadn't God turned Sodom and Gomorrah into a pile of ashes?

"First of all," Fae said, trying to be calm. "I absolutely, one hundred percent do not have syphilis. My blood was mixed up with someone else's. This is all just one big mistake. And secondly, isn't the license just a formality, really?"

"I have to have the approval of the state of Mississippi," he said with finality.

"What about God? Don't you think *He* is the central arbiter here? Wouldn't *He* want us to be married in *His* house?" In her desperation, Fae had resorted to language she thought the preacher would appreciate, but he was adamant.

The only thing that saved the wedding was Fae's sister Katrina throwing a world class tantrum at the courthouse, insinuating she knew of more than a few people who were screwing around on their husbands.

So, Fae and Jeff tied the knot as planned on a stiflingly hot day in the middle of June. The church was not air conditioned, and throughout the service Fae only heard the drone of several revolving fans. Everything—Jeff's brother nasally singing a contemporary Christian ballad, the preacher admonishing them to cherish and obey, her recitation of the vows—seemed to be taking place under water. The dress she had bought off the rack for fifty dollars at Sears clung to her skin like some type of parasite, sucking all the vital juices out of her. As they ran through the throng of well wishers who pelted them with bird seed, Fae stumbled and almost fell. Later that night in her apartment as they grappled wearily, Fae realized she had seeds plastered to her thighs and ass. She also couldn't help but wonder, feeling Jeff's hips press down on hers, about the person who really was walking around with syphilis, unknowingly dooming his or her partner to a life of slow decay.

The day after the wedding, as they were packing for their honey moon in Gatlinburg, Ed Hughey came over, bearing a bottle of Everclear as a wedding gift.

"Somehow I feel a little responsible, but don't go blaming me if you end up hating each other's guts." He chuckled then stood there uneasily, leaning on his one good leg.

"Come in, come in," they both said, because a nervous tension had settled around them that morning. Any company was good, even Ed's.

"Well, no, I have to skedaddle. Got a little business to take care of." Ed looked unusually surly as he pivoted to go. "Child support's a bitch. You remember that," he yelled up at them as he was half way down the stairs. When they were leaving Starkville on Highway 82, they saw Ed hobbling along the side of the road, wearing a bright orange vest and spearing a coke can. They didn't wave.

After they finally made it to the cabin, the first thing Jeff wanted to do was make a drink. He rummaged through the pantry and found a packet of Kool Aid, but Fae was too tired from the long drive. Sometime around three in the morning, she woke up to the drone of the TV. Jeff never came to bed. She noticed that the Everclear bottle was empty on the kitchen counter. Jeff was naked and splayed on the couch like a pair of open scissors. A cup was overturned on the carpet; the room was filled with the sickening aroma of tropical fruit punch. While Fae began to scrub the sticky mess on the carpet, she noticed Jeff convulse, as though he was shivering. He clawed the air and murmured. Fae leaned over him, hoping for some access into his dreams, some snatch of conversation that would renew her faith in him.

As if on cue, Jeff sat up, and turned to her. " That's a good idea, Tubbs," he said. "I think I *will* take the mustang."

The next morning Jeff couldn't be stirred. They planned to go hiking, but Fae knew that was out. She spent the better part of the day playing the Donkey Kong Jr. arcade game that was in the corner of the living room. Around sunset, Jeff roused himself and came out onto the porch where Fae had been sitting for an hour, pondering exactly what she had gotten herself into. He slumped into a rocking chair. Fae was so mad she could hardly stand to look at him. Until Jeff, she had never felt she could depend on a man for anything more than some occasional fun. They were all just Peter Pans with stubble. Jeff, it turned out, was no better than the rest. She wondered now, had he really picked her up off the Hughey's bathroom floor? She'd never know. At the time, she needed to believe it.

"What's the matter?" Jeff asked.

Fae continued to watch the rim of the Smokies darken. The dusk air was suffused with swirling gnats. A light on a timer suddenly clicked on above them, making Jeff's ashen face almost translucent.

"This place has bars, right?" he said.

It became clear to Fae that if Jeff wasn't already an alcoholic, he was definitely on his way to becoming one. Whenever Jeff did not come to bed, Fae awoke sometime in the night dreading what she might find. More often than not, Jeff would urinate on himself or mistake the table in the corner of the den for the toilet. He broke things in his midnight ramblings, including the nice cut-glass vase that Fae's Aunt Sue had given her as a wedding present. The worst, however, were the times Jeff decided to shave his chest. In the morning, Fae would find the bathroom sink clotted with gnarled clumps of hair, usually matted with dried shaving cream. She

even developed a system in which she swirled Drano around the sink to partially dissolve the nasty mess before she set to scrubbing away all appearances of Jeff's idiosyncrasies.

Despite his drinking problem, Jeff still managed to finish his thesis and was even accepted into the Ph.D. program at Emory. Fae, however, had been the one to fill out all the applications, even signing his name on a few occasions when there was a deadline and Jeff was too hung over to be bothered. That was how they ended up in Atlanta.

With her degree, Fae was able to get a job at Emerson Country Day, a small school that specialized in teaching children with disorders like Down's syndrome and autism. One boy Fae occasionally noticed in the hall had Progeria: his head was egg shaped, and the skin on his face looked like melted wax. He was a child trapped in a crone's form, reinforcing Fae's belief that God was not a wise and just creator.

The job fulfilled Fae in ways she hadn't expected, though she often found herself at odds with her supervisor, Mary Meadows Higginson, who thought Fae was a bit too sarcastic. When they first met, she insisted with a bright smile that Fae call her Mary Meadows and afterwards Fae would sometimes find herself mumbling the name under her breath as though it was some type of incantation to ward off evil spirits. Once, in a phone conversation with Ma, Fae tried to explain Mary Meadows's issue with her attitude.

"She says I'm not bubbly enough."

"Bubbly," Ma snorted. "You wasn't raised to be bubbly. What are you, a bottle of champagne?"

This made Fae feel a little better because Jeff had begun to echo Mary Meadows's assessment of her personality, complaining that she was the most pessimistic, mean-spirited person he knew.

The Emerson School was non-profit and had a board of trustees filled with rich housewives who had nothing better to do than give back. Nostalgic for their days as cute sorority girls at the University of Georgia, they made the teachers wear t-shirts they had designed and even made sure every fundraiser had a theme, including South Seas Luau and Beaux and Belles.

"I will not under any circumstances wear a hoop skirt," Fae had informed Mary Meadows.

In order to make some extra money (and if she were honest with herself to avoid the apartment with Jeff always encamped on the couch reading), she took an extra job working as a glorified babysitter for one of the trustees, a woman named Sandy Marvin, whose husband Chip was a vascular surgeon. They lived in a 4500 square foot mansion in Sandy Springs. The first time Fae visited the house—she had to be buzzed in through a wrought iron gate—Sandy informed her that every room in the house was monitored by video. Fae's job was to take the nine year old daughter, Madison Grace, to ballet. When she didn't have ballet, Madison Grace wanted to go to the malls in Buckhead, which Fae grudgingly assented to, as long as she could sit on a bench and read while the child spent her parents' money on Prada, Gucci, and Louis Viton.

Very quickly, Fae discovered she was completely out of her element with these people. She had never been around anyone with so much money, though Sandy often complained to her that Chip was not specialized enough and that he could be pulling in really big money. Fae began calling Madison "Princess" when she told Jeff about her babysitting.

"Do you know what *Princess* asked me today?"

"Go ahead."

"She asked where my grandmother took me when I turned ten years old. 'What are you talking about?' I said. 'You know, the trip your grandmother takes you on when you turn ten,

like, to Europe or something. We're going to Italy, but I think I'd rather go to Paris.' *Unbelievable*, right? What was I going to say to her—that my granny burned our house down when I was ten because she was smoking in bed? So no trip to Europe for *me* that year." Fae remembered standing in a damp cemetery and wearing her favorite pea jacket, blue like a robin's egg. Her father's hand perched heavily on top of her head until the preacher was done and the men began scooping sodden dirt onto the casket.

"Why do you resent these people so much just because they're wealthy? There is nothing intrinsically wrong with having opportunities because you have the money."

"It's not just that. It's this sense of . . . entitlement. I don't know. I can't explain it right."

"Stop working for them. Frankly, I'm tired of hearing about it every day."

"Some Marxist you are."

"Marxism is just a critical apparatus. The free market is our reality. Get used to it."

That night, Jeff tripped over the coffee table and landed awkwardly on his wrist. He lay moaning in the floor for an hour before Fae finally got up to check on him.

"I'm dying," he said. "I need to go to the Emergency Room."

"You'll be all right. Take some aspirin."

But Jeff persisted in his whining, and Fae gave in. More out of disgust than concern, she took him to the hospital. When the doctor informed them that the x-rays did, indeed, show a severe fracture, Fae was mortified. She told herself that she would try harder to take care of Jeff from then on, no matter how difficult he was to deal with. She would try to be a good wife.

A few weeks later, Fae went over to the Marvins' to pick up Madison (by this time Fae had been entrusted with the code to the gate) only to walk into the kitchen and discover Chip standing before the open refrigerator, looking into it longingly.

"You'd think," he said to himself, presumably unaware of her presence, "that a gallon of ice cream might last longer than a day."

Fae stood uncertainly by the door.

Chip turned and saw her.

"Damn. Sandy should have called to tell you that she and Maddie were skipping out on ballet today."

"Okay." Fae put her hand on the door, not sure if she should stay and talk or just leave. This was the first time Chip had actually spoken to her. Before, when she met him, he had merely waved his hand and rushed past, clearly on his way to surgery. Fae had pegged him as another workaholic, too consumed with his job to pay attention to his family.

"They went to Saks for a facial. Sandy believes it's time Maddie started a skin care regimen." He arched an eyebrow as if to acknowledge the absurdity of his last statement. Fae realized he was very good looking in a blandly Nordic way. He had on shorts and a polo shirt. His legs were thin, but the calves were finely muscled. Runner's legs.

"Can I offer you something to drink? You've come all this way. I can't let you go empty handed. We have, let me see, some mineral water, Yoohoo, and what I believe to be some type of diet Crystal light crap. Sorry, not a very promising selection, I suppose."

"I'll have a Yoohoo," Fae said, letting go of the door handle.

"Perfect. I'll have one, too. Come on in a sit down. I realize I was pretty rude the first time we met."

"You're a busy man, I gather."

Chip opened his mouth as if to say something and then smiled. Fae began to feel nervous, though the sensation was not unpleasurable.

"Tell me something," Chip said. "And I want an honest answer. Does Maddie like ballet at all?"

Fae considered for a second what banal lie she might tell—she knew from years of experience that most parents really didn't want the truth about their children—but something about his expression disarmed her usual caution. Madison Grace had often confided that she despised ballet, but her mom made it clear that she was never going to become Miss Teen Georgia unless she could dance. When Fae told him this, Chip nodded his head and laughed.

"The women I live with become more and more unfathomable every day. You don't look like you approve, either."

Fae found she had a hard time meeting his eyes, which were a limpid greenish-blue, the color, she realized later, of the ocean shot through with sunlight.

"It's not that. I've just never understood the point of beauty contests. I've always been the nerdy girl that couldn't care less. But then maybe that's because I knew I'd never win."

"I think you're not giving yourself enough credit." Chip smiled again munificently. Fae blushed.

"Sandy would have liked me to become a plastic surgeon. Then I could fix all her little imperfections. But I prefer the flaws in people, at least on the outside. The insides, though, are another matter. Take for instance the narrow highways we call blood vessels. This little blockage, maybe it's been growing for years, slowly expanding like balloon, and then one day—Pop! That's scary for people. You are walking around with this time bomb and you don't even

know it. Remember that basketball player several years ago dying right there on the court? Hank something, I think. I had money on his team to win it all. Very sad."

He took a long swig of Yoohoo, and they sat in silence looking at each other. Fae thought that if she stayed much longer, she might do something foolish.

*

In the middle of Christmas dinner, the phone rang. Ma answered.

"It's for you, baby."

As Fae got up from the table, she realized she was not prepared to talk to Jeff. She hadn't given him a thought in almost a week.

"Where's my son?" The voice of her mother-in-law surprised Fae.

"I don't know. I can't really speak for him. He didn't tell me his plans, but I thought . . ." The familiar guilt was rising up in Fae. She was a terrible person, abandoning her husband at Christmas. She imagined him flailing on the floor like some helpless sea creature removed from its element. The image repulsed and lacerated her. His suicide threats, which seemed silly and pathetic at the time, now loomed up in Fae's mind. But it was hard to take a man holding a butter knife to his wrist seriously.

"I don't know what's going on between y'all, but I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him and I'm beginning to get worried."

"Did you call him?"

"Yes, and he ain't answerin."

"I guess he's still back in Atlanta."

"Why would he stay in Atlanta through Christmas?"

The question was a good one, and Fae had no answer for it. When she left Jeff the day after refusing to go to counseling one more time, she assumed he would seek comfort in the bosom of his family. Fae assumed he would go running back to his mother and that she would take him off of Fae's hands for a bit. By that point he seemed more of a child to Fae than the students she worked with on a daily basis.

"I'll try to get in touch with him."

"You'd best do that."

As she sat down a little unsteadily, trying very hard to mask her growing desire to burst into tears, Fae realized the usual ruckus of family dinner had stopped and everyone was looking at her.

"You all right, hon?" Her Aunt Sue put her doughy palm on Fae's shoulder.

"I'm okay. I'm just feeling a little lightheaded. Maybe I'll step outside for some air." Everyone looked down sympathetically as she got up from the unfinished plate and went into the den to get her cell phone. Soon, the conversation started up again, and she slipped past the crowd and out the front door.

Around back, Fae crouched down to examine the withered remains of Pa's garden. She dialed Jeff. The phone rang twice and a disembodied voice prompted her to leave a message:

"Jeff, I know you may not want to talk right now, but you should at least call your mother. She's worried to death about you. I'm worried about you. What's going on? I'm sorry about . . ." A long beep indicated that she was out of time. Could he have really done something horrible? In the past year, Fae often found herself fantasizing about Jeff dying. Alcoholics were clumsy; they died young. Sometimes, if Jeff leaned a little precariously over the deck railing, Fae imagined pushing him. No one would know it wasn't an accident. Then she would come back to

herself, appalled by the visceral power of the thought. Besides, it would be just her luck for him to only break his neck and become an invalid. Then she would have to become the martyr. Then she would never be free.

A few weeks before she left, Jeff suggested that they find a house and live as roommates, nothing more. He was finally acknowledging that something was wrong. Fae even agreed to a day spent looking for a place to accommodate this new arrangement. In the bathroom of a ramshackle house in Forest Park, she curled up into a ball on the grimy tile floor and cried. Later, on the car ride back to their apartment, she became cold, pointing out how ridiculous it was to be roommates.

"What if I wanted to bring someone over? How would you like to hear me fucking some other guy?"

"I wouldn't like that at all, I guess," Jeff said, lowering his eyes and almost running into a truck that hurtled by them on 285.

"That's right, get us killed." Then she said something terrible. "Truth is I'd rather be dead right now than be with you."

At home, Jeff finally asked her the question that would shear them in two at last, and she lied, out of kindness, she felt, because the reality was too complex, too muddled to explain at all.

"Yes, there's someone else. Isn't there always someone else?"

Well past midnight on Christmas, Fae's cell phone rang. Jeff sobbed heroically on the other end. For several minutes all she could discern was "How could you?" Then she patiently listened to him catalog all her deficiencies as a wife and person.

"I can't believe I married a slut like you."

Fae hardly said a word. She felt the harangue was her due, a penance.

"Thank you for calling," she said. "I was worried."

*

Except for the awkwardness at Christmas, Fae was having her most relaxing vacation home in years. She spent her time visiting with the host of nieces and nephews and uncles and aunts who lived mostly in trailers within a few miles of her parents' house.

In the evenings, Fae watched bowl games with her father or walked around the family land, which extended back miles from the road and was bordered by several oil wells. The pulsing whir always comforted Fae, made her feel at peace. When she went off to college, she had a hard time sleeping without the sound.

"How many bowl games have they got now?" Pa asked her one night as they were watching the Chick-fil-A Bowl.

"A lot. I can't keep them all straight."

"Seems like everything has changed its name. Wasn't this the Peach Bowl? Now it's just some company wants me to buy somethin'." They had, in fact, just watched the Poulan Weed-eater Bowl, the Champs Sports Bowl, and the Meinecke Car Care Bowl in the previous few days. "I miss when they were all named after a fruit. Like the Tangerine Bowl. Do they have a Tangerine Bowl anymore?"

"I don't know, Pa."

Despite herself, she was enjoying her Pa's company. He never said a word about Jeff.

"Don't that Berry boy play for Ole Miss?" Ma interrupted, coming to stand in kitchen doorway. Her frizzled gray hair hung lank, and her forehead had a patina of sweat. She was busy

getting everything ready for another family dinner on New Year's Day, this time for her children.

"I remember babysitting for that monster," Fae said. "He and his brother duct taped me to the wall. Then, when the piece of work mother drops me off, she reaches under the car seat for change to pay me."

"Well, Charlene says he's as big as a house now."

"That's right. Charlene was buddy-buddy with that woman when they were in high school. They went down to South America on some church mission. What was her name. Something silly. Cherry?"

"I believe you're right. Cherry Berry. It *is* a silly name."

But Fae was no longer thinking about Cherry Berry. Instead, she imagined having to face her sister Charlene, who was driving up from the coast in the morning. The family in Slab Town had let her off easy so far, but Charlene would quickly make things uncomfortable.

"I'm going out for awhile," Fae said and got up and kissed Ma on the forehead.

"Kind of late, ain't it?" Pa said. "Take the gun."

Pa's .45 lay on the kitchen counter by the door. Though they had grandchildren in and out all the time, Pa was never very particular about his firearms. Fae ran her finger along the barrel, which felt oily and worn.

"Who am I going to run into around here except kinfolks?"

"Never know." Mississippi had recently made it legal to shoot any trespasser on sight, and Fae sensed that Pa was hoping he'd get the chance to pot a thief; the more likely scenario, however, seemed to be her getting shot, or at least shot at, if she stayed out too late.

"Tell you what," Pa said. "Why don't I come with you? Your Ma will be happy to get me out of the house, at least."

"That's right," Ma said as she squirted cheese whiz on a cracker. "You stay out of my kitchen."

Even though it was December, the night air was merely brisk, not cold. Neither one needed a coat. Pa had on the same blue Dickey work suit he wore every day. The dull gleam of sheep eyes watched them walk past. The herd was her brother Roy's latest hobby after the blueberry farm failed when the INS had hauled off all the Guatemalans in town. Roy was her most successful sibling, and he had built a pond and a nice big two-story house on the lot directly behind Hickey Boy's house the year before Ma and Pa moved in.

"Where you aim to go?" Pa asked.

Fae had already begun to walk in the direction of the old house, so Pa merely followed along. A flame bloomed in front of his face as he lit a cigarette. As they walked, the burning tip seemed to dance like a wil-o-wisp. They didn't talk for a while. For some reason, Fae thought about the trampoline her parents bought one year at Christmas. On a summer night when she was seventeen, she had snuck out to meet the boy she was dating at the time and they had sex on it. As she would later find with a water bed, the idea was better than the execution. Still the memory filled her with longing. The boy was not particularly smart, but he'd been lovely to look at. Fae could remember the way his eyelashes felt as they softly brushed her nipples.

"Well, Chicken, I figure I'll tell you a story you hadn't heard before."

Fae started at her father's voice. She was embarrassed to be thinking such thoughts with him around.

"You probably believe you've heard them all, but this one I've kept to myself. Now you know I was stationed in Korea and then later in Guam. Near the end, I had me a girlfriend. She told me to call her Mimi, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't her name. Never could get the hang of that language. And, yes, by that time I was married to Miss Amy Leah." Amy Leah was Pa's first wife, who still occasionally invited Fae to what Amy termed Christmas Teas, even if it was the middle of summer. "I'm not going to excuse myself," Pa continued, "but that was just the way things were. What I remember mainly, though, is the day I had to leave for the Philippines. Mimi was a very nice girl, very proper and elegant, I thought. She went with me to the train station. We rode on her bike—she was so small, she just fit right there on my lap like a youngun. And she carried one of those paper parasols with her. That's what I remember most. The train's about to leave the station and I'm leaning out the window and she's crying by this time and I'll be darned if it doesn't start to rain. The train pulls out and sky is just pouring and she walks with me, the rain dripping through the paper. That's the last I saw of her—just standing there at the end of the platform with that sad little umbrella."

Suddenly Pa got quiet. He lit another cigarette, and the flame's shadow tinged his face with a foreign gravity.

They were almost upon the remnants of the old house. A deep chill washed through Fae, almost as though, like her Granny used to say, someone was walking across her grave. The place was largely invisible from the path, merely a deeper darkness settled back in a wall of cane. The drone from the wells was louder here; they were only a few hundred yards away from the tall chain link fence topped with barbed wire that rimmed this part of the property.

“I feel bad about the way I left things sometimes. I still feel it here in the chest like an old wound. Hurts worse than my finger ever did.” Pa exhaled a stream of smoke and shook his head. “Kind of a sad story, I guess.”

“Thanks for telling it to me.”

“You’re welcome, Chicken.”

In the clear night sky, the stars wobbled, just pinpricks in vastness. Fae wondered how many up there had been extinguished long ago. How long before the news, traveling at the speed of light, made it this far?

CHAPTER 12:

PAPER ROUTE

Now that his sister had finally gone back to Louisville, Walter could settle into his grief. Mimi was a whirlwind—well-intentioned, chipper, relentless. She never gave Walter one moment to think, to just sit at his kitchen table and nurse his coffee each morning and feel terrible. She dragged him out to spaghetti suppers or dances where she would play piano. Always the piano. She warbled show tunes, pleased with the sound of her own voice and oblivious to the pained winces transfiguring faces across the room. She was also oblivious in other ways. When Walter first mentioned that he would need someone to sort through Lara's clothes, she said, "Oh Wally, you know I've always been slender. There isn't a thing I could wear, I'm sure. But if you want I'll look." This was not what Walter was suggesting. How hard was it for a sister to do a simple task for her brother, to spare him from sifting through his dead wife's clothes and possessions?

So Walter was quite relieved when Mimi lost interest in him. He just had to wait her out. There were men back in Louisville who still liked the way her legs looked well-enough to tolerate her singing and strange diets. "Baby brother, I'm so sorry that this has happened to you," she said before getting into her Grand Prix, a hoopty of a car that Walter surmised only black people and Mimi drove. Then she kissed him on the cheek, and he was left to ponder exactly what she meant. Was "this" simply the death of Lara, a death they all knew was imminent for almost two years after she was diagnosed with leukemia? Or did "this" encompass something far

bigger? His life of caretaking for Lara or his son Bill? They were both so fragile. It only took one small oversight for everything, a carefully tended life until that point, to unravel completely. You cannot anticipate tragedy, he decided. Or disease and infirmity for that matter. You just deal with the aftermath as best you can. This conclusion, however, did not comfort him as he watched his sister's ridiculous car pull out of the driveway, as he turned back to face his empty house.

After Mimi left, Bill came by to visit. He had an uncanny sense for Mimi's presence and avoided her whenever he could. She made him nervous with her constant talk about people in Louisville and current events and far off things that Bill knew nothing about. When he was a teenager, Mimi took Bill out to lunch on Sundays at the China Garden, in an attempt, she said, "to bring the boy out of his shell." Every week Mimi wrangled with the waiter about her gluten-free diet. Later, Bill would tell his father that he just wanted to slide under the table. Even then he had the sense everyone in the place was looking at him, talking about him under their breath.

He told Walter that the constant whispering reminded him of the distant whooshing sound that came from inside the conch on top of the fireplace mantle. It was a memento of a trip to Myrtle Beach when Bill was very young, one of the few vacations they ever went on. He loved to sit with it pressed to his ear. Perhaps he heard the ocean crashing, could even see the seagulls hanging stiff in the wind like kites. But somehow, and Bill could never explain why, this pleasant sound became oppressive when he heard it out in public. He thought of drowning, of being pulled out into a gray, depthless ocean by the riptide. Later the schizophrenia would be diagnosed, and he took his meds every day. The hum subsided; he managed. But Mimi was another matter.

When Bill walked in, Walter was sitting at his kitchen table, his usual perch now that Mimi wasn't there to prod him each morning. Bill wore what Walter called his uniform: torn grey t-shirt, jeans, and dirt-streaked Reeboks. "Look what the cat drug in."

"Collecting around the neighborhood," Bill said and sat down at the table. Among his many part-time jobs, he delivered the *Ellington Tribune*. He could not commit himself to a regular job, did not have the patience or aptitude to work with the public or sit in a cubicle all day, so he found side lines here and there that kept him busy, even if they didn't really pay the rent. Walter generally took care of that.

"No one is nice anymore," Bill said.

"That's a pretty blanket statement." Walter was happy to have his son there. Despite his relief at Mimi's departure, he was lonely and still could not bring himself to go through Lara's things.

"I mean in this neighborhood I deliver. Used to be these old women would invite me in, give me a piece of pie or something? Then they all died, I guess, because everyone is Mexican and this one house has a big dog, I call them devil dogs. It will stand there looking at me when I come to deliver. It just watches me and doesn't bark, which scares me more than if it did. I asked them if they could keep him inside, but they said no. Very mean people." Invariably, when Bill left a job, he told Walter that his employers were "mean people." Walter could guess that they probably just became fed up with Bill's erratic sense of time or his creative interpretation of simple directions. The paper route, though, had been a constant for Bill. He seemed to keep it up, whereas other jobs like the plant nursery came and went, just like when he was young. One week it was stamp collecting, the next astronomy. A whole section of the attic was devoted to Bill's aborted hobbies.

Walter got up from the table and began to get ready for lunch. He put his breakfast dishes in the sink and dumped the coffee grounds in the trash. “You’re not giving up the route, are you?”

Bill was watching Walter intently, and Walter hoped he was thinking seriously about the question, the ramifications of giving up the one job he did well.

“You know,” Bill said, “you really should start a compost pile. Like those grounds or eggs or any little scraps—they make good fertilizer. I could do it for you.”

Walter opened the fridge and stared inside for a moment. He was not hungry, but felt compelled to at least try. “If you like. The yard is your province.”

“I’ve been looking on-line. There’s this organic farm in Colorado. Anyone can live there if they just do some work, pitch in and harvest and such. I was thinking about driving out there, seeing what it’s all about.”

So this was the new thing—organic farming. Walter closed the fridge with more force than he intended. “You’re just going to drop everything and move? That’s sudden.”

“Guess so. I was thinking I needed a change anyway. And with Mom . . . I mean you don’t need me bothering you all the time.” Bill looked away from Walter.

“But you may not like this place. And what about your route?”

Bill avoided Walter’s eyes, looked out the back door into the afternoon shadows of the big oaks. “I guess I have gotten kinda tired of the route.”

“Listen,” Walter said in his reasonable voice. “What if someone could take the route over for a little while, hold it for you just in case?”

“I don’t think I know anyone who could do it.”

"What if I did it?" The notion came to him suddenly. Yes, he would do the paper route. He was awake at 4 am anyway most days, just lying in bed, the room a vault around him. Walter would do the route, and when Bill was tired of playing farmer, he'd come back and have his old job waiting. It was a good compromise.

"Don't go off half-cocked," he told Bill. "Hedge your bets."

Bill came the next morning to take Walter on a test run.

"Here is the list of customers." Bill handed him a creased paper ripped from a notebook. "I also tried to draw you a map to show you the way I go."

Walter looked at the crude but carefully labeled drawing and knew that Bill had spent hours on it. He was already beginning to feel tired. Why had he decided to take this on?

They passed the new high school with its strange cone-shaped system of roofs, then crossed Sevier. These were intermediary neighborhoods—not as nice as those above Watauga where Walter lived, not as bad as those butting up to Halloman, the chemical plant that dominated the north side of town. Walter worked his whole adult life there, as had his father. At one time it seemed everyone in Ellington worked for Halloman. Now half the big houses in Forest Hills were for sale, and recently Walter heard about an old friend's child, Tandy, who was laid off for no good reason at all. They had just come to get him in his office and escorted him out that very day. Sent a security guard to watch while Tandy cleaned out his desk. Walter couldn't shake the feeling that something about the world had intrinsically changed while he wasn't paying attention.

"So, this is the drop," Bill said and pulled up to a corner. Several bundles of papers were scattered about. A street light made a dull halo around them. Bill got out, popped his trunk, and

began to rummage around. Walter stretched his legs, felt the morning cool in his bones. This was certainly Bill's cup of tea. Dead quiet and absolutely no one about.

Walter began to notice Bill's peculiarities when he was around the age of twelve. One night, after he helped Lara bathe, after the usual evening ordeal, he sat down in the den to have a drink. Somehow, he sensed that Bill was not in the house. He didn't know how he knew this, but he stepped out on the front lawn and stood looking into the blank night. "Bill?" he called, softly at first, as though the neighbors might hear him, might swarm out of their houses accusing him of losing his son. Then louder. "Bill. Come home." A noise came from above him, from the top of the magnolia. There was Bill, nestled in the darkness, one red Converse catching the light from the porch.

"What on earth? Come down here, son. Come down."

"But I like it here," Bill said. "I like it up here."

Walter came to expect these disappearances, but couldn't help worrying. When he got older, Bill began to wander the streets at night, and sometimes Walter would awake with a start, find the empty bed, and go out searching in his car. Oftentimes, he didn't find Bill, but in the morning Bill would always be there at the kitchen table reading the comics out loud to himself. Once, though, Walter was called down to the police station. There had been a burglary, and the patrol car pulled up beside Bill, who was on one of his usual rambles. The flashing strobe and the cops yelling scared him and he began to run. They made assumptions and chased after him, eventually finding him at a construction site. He had sprained his ankle jumping from a wall. When Walter got to the station, he found Bill curled into a ball, his eyes wild as any cornered animal. "Don't let them eat me," he kept saying. "Their teeth are sharp. So sharp." How did Bill see these men who now seemed as afraid of Bill as he was of them? And Walter wondered—not

for the first or last time—how do you protect the people you love from the demons inside their heads?

Bill began to carefully roll the newspapers into slim batons, snapping a rubber band around them when he was done. “See, double twist it tight. Otherwise it’s hard to throw.” They shoveled the papers into a canvas sack that Bill slung over his shoulder, and they began to make their deliveries. The neighborhood sloped down gradually towards Center St, and once, as they rounded a corner, Walter could see the spires of the old St. Dominic’s, the church he’d been married in. Abandoned now. The stained glass windows were filled with holes made by vandals. The new church was up off the interstate to Knoxville. Walter had only been there once in the last year—for Lara’s service. So many nice people who felt sorry for him, who probably thought, “Now he’s free.” And Mimi there too, yammering on, loving to talk even in the worst of circumstances. Everyone was very polite, but what did they know, really?

When he found her that morning her skin had been cold as a plate left in the fridge. Something he’d forgotten. She died in the night while he was sleeping in another room. This had been their arrangement for almost thirty years, but near the end she had wanted him there again and he slept with her, feeling her weight beside him, the shudders her body made while dreaming. But that night he had fallen asleep on the couch, too exhausted to even get up after making dinner and cleaning up, after going through the constant battle of the pills that was the same every night, even if they were new pills for new ailments. “No, no,” she moaned. “They hurt to swallow.” She never got used to it. Always some pill or another and she never got used to it. He regretted so badly that he hadn’t woken up beside her that morning. So what did these people know or the doctors either? He had trusted them too much. The mind cannot cope with

such a shock, they said after the accident. Guilt is the most powerful of emotions. Maybe she could have overcome it? Maybe she could. The last few years without her valium and her antidepressants, she became lucid. They held long, completely rational conversations. This was wonderful for Walter, but at a terrible price. She was in a great deal of pain. And she chose the pain this time, refused to be doped up again. How she bore it all, Walter didn't know.

"This is the devil dog house," Bill said, a trace of hesitation in his voice. He flicked the paper onto the sagging porch. The house rose above them, bigger than all the rest on the street, but also the worst kept. There were toys strewn around the yard, milk jugs and beer cans, a rake and some other tools left out to rust.

"Sloppy people," Walter said.

"Come on," "Bill said. "I don't think it's awake. Let's go."

Walter looked around for the dog, wondering if it was a figment of Bill's imagination. Despite his meds, he still saw things at times. Walter began to wonder about these people, the husband who would let his wife and children live in such filth. Sharp tools to cut their feet. A dog that could easily turn on its owners and bite into delicate child haunch. Walter began to hate him a little, this man he was imagining, who probably sat down from work first thing every day and began drinking his beer.

"So," Bill said, clearly relieved to be past the devil dog, "you think you can handle this? Because it's okay if you don't feel up to it. I don't see why . . ." He trailed off and Walter could gather the gist of his thoughts. Bill believed, as usual, that this trip out to Colorado would be successful. He would have no reason to come back. Although he hated to see his son fail, Walter found comfort with the thought that Bill would likely get tired of those people or they would get

tired of him and he'd be back, sitting there at Walter's kitchen table, just as he always eventually found his way home from his late night jaunts.

"It's okay. I need something to do." Walter was breathing a little heavy from all the walking, but he also felt something, not exhilaration exactly, but keenness in his physical sense of the world that he hadn't felt in a while. There *was* something about being out before everyone else. Rags of mist hung in the street lights. Everyone in each house was at rest, at least for the moment.

"You won't forget to call me, will you," Walter said. "I want to know how you're doing."

"Sure, Pop. You bet."

It was getting towards six now and they could hear a few cars on Center St. They only had a few more papers to deliver. Walter looked down for the spires of St. Dominic's again, waited to hear the old bells ring, waited even though he knew they would not.

*

Walter's father worked for Halloman as a chemist, and everyone said he was quite brilliant. He made the company lots of money with a new process to develop film. So it was natural Walter would come back home and work there, too, after getting his business degree a few miles up the road in Knoxville. That first year he lived with his parents. His father was settling into an eccentric retirement and played his violin at all hours wearing nothing but a mangy bathrobe. Walter avoided his mother's attempts to set him up with the nice girls of her friends, the same girls he had known and been too shy to approach in high school. Mimi was in Louisville teaching music and already vowing she'd never marry, so his mother's hints gradually took on a pleading desperation. Eventually he moved into a small apartment off Center Street.

He was working in an entry level sales position at Halloman in the same office as a classmate from UT, Sam Gibbon. Sam cracked his knuckles a lot and seemed to abhor every minute he spent in the office, would contrive any excuse to step out for a "breath of fresh air," a joke Sam found constantly amusing because the air at Halloman was thick and rank. It was Sam who tried to pull him out of his monkish existence and called him a mama's boy for living at home. When Walter moved out, Sam said, "Now, we're getting somewhere. The first step away from the nest is the hardest." For a while Walter refused Sam's offers to get a drink and was quite content to go home to his little apartment and read a paperback mystery or take a walk and then sit in the nearby park to watch the sun go down in a chemical blaze of purple and orange. There was a public pool across the street, and he took to swimming laps before he fixed dinner. The children's squeals reverberated on the water, echoing through him as his long arms and legs pulled him across the length of the pool. The sounds washed through his consciousness, a murmur of pleasant chaos. Intonations of delight were balanced by the stern yells of life guards and parents. It was the hum of a life he had only vicarious access to and gradually became stricken by. So, not really knowing why, he did accept Sam Gibbons offer to "tie one on."

He found himself following Sam to an unfamiliar part of town and could barely contain his sense of panic when Sam pulled into the parking lot of the Thunderbird Motel, the location of all types of criminal behavior based on the frequency the name appeared in the paper.

"You're sure about this?" Walter said.

"Hold on tight, brother. You're in it now. No going back." The bar was at the end of a long corridor that ran beside the front desk. Walter could hear a languid blues song playing and the room looked positively dank. Blue Christmas lights strung about the ceiling were the only source of light. Walter could make out an aquarium behind the bar which was filled not with

water and swimming fish, but empty bottles of whiskey and vodka. The bar tender who took his order of rum and coke was a black man in a tuxedo who didn't smile or even look at him. He filled the glass full of alcohol, then spritzed a few drops of coke from the fountain as an afterthought.

"That's what I like about this place," said Sam. "They make a strong drink."

Walter was not at all a drinker; he had been drunk only once in his life and the experience led him to avoid alcohol in general. But he needed something to get himself through this night, so he took two big gulps and choked down most of the rum. Just as he began to feel a bit warm around the edges, he noticed a woman sitting in a corner by herself. Walter could tell, even in the bar's dimness, that she was very pretty, but also distant, annoyed. He heard a loud laugh followed by a few feminine titters. Walter realized the laugher was Sam, but had absolutely no interest in joining the conversation. He was drawn to the woman who looked so unhappy and out of place. He wouldn't have the courage to approach her if he wasn't tipsy.

Lara sat rigid and prim as a school teacher in a Western, her back to the wall. She seemed to ignore her surroundings—the blue Christmas lights draped haphazardly above her, the strange silvery looking wall paper, which perhaps was embroidered by swirls of purple flowers, the dim people who moved and talked as though they were blind, the loud blues on the jukebox. Lara simply acted as though she was not part of the scene, which only heightened Walter's curiosity. He found himself moving, almost as though he was rolling, until suddenly he was standing beside her. He had never done this before and could think of nothing better than to pretend to examine the wall paper, which was textured like velvet. Walter ran his hand along the wall.

"A-ha, just as I thought," he said. The woman looked at him critically, but also with a vague interest, as though she wondered what kind of foolish thing he would say next to embarrass himself.

"Velvet," Walter continued. "Now that's the mark of a high class establishment." She began to look down, and Walter could tell she was trying to conceal a smile.

"I'm sure my date would agree," she said. "He seems to be a regular."

"I would never bring you to such a place if you were my date," Walter said.

Even before the accident, Walter babied Lara. She quit her job at the bank at his insistence and he drove her anywhere she wanted to go—to the market, to get her hair done, to shop at Taylor's. And, truthfully, he enjoyed these outings. He could think of nothing better than to push the cart along as his wife sauntered through the grocery store, picking out whatever struck her fancy that week. He didn't mind sitting in the car and reading the paper and waiting—waiting for that moment when she came out of the store or the beauty parlor, stepped out into the sun like a doe appearing before him in the forest, there just for him to see and appreciate.

Walter also never felt that the housework was completely Lara's responsibility. He did the dishes every night while Lara sat watching him and smoked her last cigarette of the day. Walter tried to get her to quit, but she always said, "Everyone has to have one vice." This was before Bill. Walter did want children. He looked wistfully across the street at the three ring circus that constituted the Duckenfields' chaotic household. "Eight boys," Lara said in wonder. "Imagine. Just imagine."

"They seem happy," Walter said. "Something is always going on, that's for sure."

Lara looked at him doubtfully, the shadow of some fear playing in her face. “I’m not saying eight or even four or five,” he reassured her. But he could tell how careful she was to keep her distance at certain times of the month. He couldn’t be sure, but there were days when she would flinch at his touch on her shoulder, would pull away from his encircling hands around her waist. “You’re sweet,” she would say, kissing him on the forehead like a child. Those moments made him wilt inside, took away his lust and his hopes.

Finally, he convinced her or she assented or it was just a mistake. Walter was never sure how it really happened, but Lara began waking up sick to her stomach every morning and then they were parents. Walter looked back on the next five years before the accident fondly, though if he were honest, they were also a blur, like one of those paintings that were becoming famous, just a bunch of vibrant colors splashed about; just entwining ribbons and lines that couldn’t be separated out from one another. He noticed how frazzled Lara seemed every night when he came home, but he tried very hard to do his fair share, taking Bill on his lap or watching him crawl around the den while Lara smoked more cigarettes in the dark of the patio. One image that did stay with him: stepping out to tell her something and seeing just the glowing end pulsing like some beacon. Only her pale slender fingers were illuminated in the shroud of darkness. “What?” she said. “What?”

He thought that maybe he needed to let Lara have more freedom so he began to give her driving lessons. They would circle around the big parking lots at the high school on the weekends while Bill slept in the back seat. Lara was a careful driver but also a very nervous one. She was constantly checking her mirrors, or touching random knobs to reassure herself. She held her breath when she put the brakes on, worried perhaps that this time they wouldn’t work.

Later, he couldn't remember why she had wanted to go down to the bank. He took care of all the bills and made sure she had enough cash every week for groceries or anything else she wanted. Perhaps she was visiting a former co-worker. Maybe someone had gotten pregnant or married. He just didn't pay attention because he was home from work that day with a summer cold. He felt like he was ten feet underwater. So he just nodded at whatever she said and asked her to hurry back before Bill got out of kindergarten. It couldn't have been long, certainly no more than thirty minutes, but in his memory it seemed like hours before the phone rang and he was told to come get his wife, that something had happened, a very bad accident. "She's all right? Is she hurt?" Walter yelled. "Fine," the man said. "Physically, she's fine. Not a scratch. Just come down please." Yes, physically she was fine, but when Walter saw her, he knew she had been changed somehow, that some part of her was lost.

"She put it in drive instead of reverse. It was just bad timing for that old woman to be walking out then." Walter talked to the cop on the scene several times afterwards, trying to put it all together, because Lara wouldn't say anything about it, could hardly make herself even open her mouth to eat for weeks. "Pinned the woman against the building. But here's the thing, Mr. Tolliver, your wife kept gunning the accelerator. Maybe she just panicked. You see that with inexperienced drivers. But it was strange. A manager from the bank had to pull her out of the car. He had to pull her foot off the gas."

*

Walter worried about Bill. He worried that the old Subaru hatchback wouldn't be up to the trip, and would break down somewhere in the middle of the country, maybe on some desolate highway in Kansas, no one around who gave a damn, just shooshing corn and wheat. He worried

that the people Bill was going to live with would be "mean," and would make Bill feel stupid or burdensome. Yet, he didn't really want his son to fail. He wanted Bill to come back on his own, he realized. The worst thing of all would be that he didn't want to come back.

While Walter carried these fears around with him, he got up every morning to deliver the papers. They were always there, something that needed to be taken care of at least, and after a few days he got the route down and didn't really look at Bill's map anymore. By the end of the week, Walter was even tinkering with the route; he was discovering a whole new neighborhood. Something about being there in front of the people's houses, dropping the paper softly on their stoops, made him feel close to them, almost like he was looking in on them in their sleep, as he had done so many years with Lara. Just standing there, listening to make sure everything was okay. If she was tossing and turning, murmuring loudly, he sat down on the bed beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder, as if to steady her from heaving in those unknown waters.

One other thing bothered him. He never saw a sign of Bill's devil dog. The house was still messy, but he could see no evidence of a dog—no dog house, or chains, or dog bowls on the porch. Perhaps the devil dog really was a creation of Bill's mind and this worried him anew. Was he taking all his meds? Did the dosage need to be adjusted?

Finally, Bill called to say he had gotten there okay. Of course he had taken a roundabout way and gotten lost a few times, but Bill said he enjoyed the trip, had never imagined how flat certain parts of this country could be, and that the Smokies just couldn't compare to the Rockies. "How are you making out with the paper?"

"Oh fine. Fine. No mishaps. No one has called complaining they didn't get a paper as far as I know. But I did wonder . . ." Walter paused, not sure how to broach the subject delicately. "I haven't seen that dog of yours. I wonder why."

"Well, you're lucky then."

"How many times did you see him?"

"I don't know, Pop. A few. He scared me so I didn't hang around hoping to see him, I'll tell you that."

"Sure, well maybe he ran away or something." He couldn't after all bring himself to ask. "Take care of yourself, son."

Lara's closet held traces of some feminine mélange of powder and flowery perfume, but also moth balls, the smell of age and disuse. Walter clicked on the light and stood there with a trash bag in his hand pondering what remained of Lara. She never got rid of anything, even the billowy summer dresses she no longer wore after the accident and couldn't fit into regardless. Mostly there were moo moos, brightly colored and formless. Mimi was truthful if brutal in her assessment: Lara had gained a few pounds over the years. She was quite transformed from the slender girl he married. Was it the constantly burgeoning list of medication or just the usual results of age? Either you got sharp and wiry like he himself had, easy to bruise and break, or you took on some extra padding, kept adding layers of protection. Perhaps this is what Lara needed. He began to pile the contents of the closet on the bed. He had planned to take it all down to the Salvation Army, but really, who would want any of these clothes? It was a time warp from the 50s and 60s. And they were hers. Walter didn't like to think of people pawing through her clothes. Perhaps he should just take it all out back and have a bonfire. But that wasn't any good. He left the mound of clothes on the bed, shut the door.

A few days later, he was delivering to the messy house and began to feel uneasy. It reminded him of some spooky mansion in a horror movie, like the house in *Psycho*. Walter never thought Bill capable of violence, but he secretly feared Bill could become like that young man, go really crazy and do something terrible without even realizing it. Walter shook these thoughts out of his mind and began walking down the street. He could hear a mockingbird somewhere about, and it reassured him. Then everything became completely still, so still that he stopped right in his tracks. He thought he heard a creak and then did hear the distinct sound of clicks padding behind him on the street. Slowly, he turned around and there was Bill's dog, a large Doberman pinscher. Panic and relief began to well up inside him. He was real, but that was also a problem at the moment. Walter began to back up slowly, unable to take his eyes off the dog

"Don't mind him. He's a big pussycat," said a voice that made Walter almost jump out of his skin.

"Good God," he said and dropped the bag of papers. "You scared the hell out me."

"Sorry," said the man. He came out and stood beside his dog, which was now wiggling its butt and whining. "I don't sleep so well these days. I really didn't mean to frighten you."

"Oh." Walter was having a hard time finding his voice. He felt constricted, invaded by this unexpected man, a man who couldn't keep his yard tidy, and would let his dog scare schizophrenics and old men.

"You're not the same as the other fella," the man continued.

"My son," Walter said.

"Yeah, I tried to tell him Pooter here is harmless but he wasn't having it."

"Bill is afraid . . . My son is afraid of dogs."

"Well, sure, I can understand that I guess. Looks can be deceiving sometimes. And sorry about the scare. I try to wait a few minutes before getting the paper. It's hard, you know, when all you look forward to every day is a new job listing in the classifieds."

"You lost your job."

"Laid off from Halloman six months ago. Really got the ramrod. I was three years away from retirement."

"I'm sorry. That disappoints me. I worked there myself years ago. It was a good company to work for then."

"Well, let me tell you, it's not the same as when you were there. Loyalty's not a word to be applied to business these days. Everyone looks out for themselves. They could give a good goddamn for me and my family, and that's the God's honest truth."

"Yes, it's a shame. Well, I guess I should finish making the rounds." Walter picked up the sack and slung it around his shoulder.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're about the oldest paper boy I ever seen." Then the man turned and went back into his house of disarray, his disheveled life. Walter turned to go, but couldn't quite make himself move yet. A light flipped on, probably in the kitchen, and Walter could see the silhouette of him bent over, reading hungrily.

The worst was the bathroom, with its cabinets full of bottles. He had waited this long to face it. Tiles pink as Pepto-Bismol. That had been the style. And he never thought to make a change. It was Lara's bathroom anyway. He could not even pronounce all the names of the different drugs nor did he really know what they were all for. Psychotropic, sedative, nausea—

doctors kept writing the prescriptions and dutifully he went through the process every day, like a habit, like smoking. This one with food, this one in the morning, this one right before bed.

"I've been nothing but a chemistry experiment. And a failed one at that," Lara had said during one of their last conversations.

"No, it's not like that," he protested. "You shouldn't think about yourself that way."

"You are a sweet man." She kissed his cheek. "And that has been your problem your whole life."

Walter began to clean out the bathroom. All the bottles seemed so light and insignificant. Just old, useless trash now. Walter didn't remember buying all this mouthwash, but here they were, too, rows of unopened bottles. He held one up and looked through the unnaturally green fluid. He thought about what it would be like to be at the bottom of the ocean, strange fish floating about, kelp and coral and the heaviness of all that water, the silence.

Bill had called him the day before.

"I met a woman, Pop. She's helping me out. She's really nice."

"That's good to hear," Walter said, a terrible pressure in him. "I'm glad to hear you're getting along."

"I'll send you a picture of the mountains."

"Yes, do that. I'd like that." There was a long pause on the line. Bill had never been good at carrying on a conversation. He was never good at telling the important details, the things someone might really want to know. Walter searched for something to say, something to keep talking about. "And the route, don't worry. Everything's fine. Things are working out just fine."

CHAPTER 13:

OBJECTS AWAITING MOTION

Before everything else—here is a nice moment. It's a late summer afternoon and Les is happy. His sons jostle for position, fall over one another like puppies waiting for him to kick the ball. His wife sits on the back steps. He can hear the ice slosh in her glass of lemonade. The boys giggle and push one another.

"Mikey," he says, directing traffic "You go over by the pecan. Dylan stay where you are. Then you both go for it like I taught you."

The ball flies off his foot and they scramble. Les admires their urgency, their willingness to simply jerk into action. The ungainliness and the struggle of motion. He knows the numbers, what force and resistance and trajectory should equal. He could go inside right then and make up a question for the coming semester: If a father of two, a husband, kicks a ball with x force and at y trajectory how far will it go? How high will it bounce when it comes back to earth? At what rate will it decelerate? What other variables do we need to consider? Resistances. The grass. Because zoysia will cradle a ball in its dense blades. Is the air thick with humidity? As they swarm around, the sweat on Les's boys catches the light and their faces and arms become translucent as glass. They are reckless and breakable.

"Kick it again," they scream and Les tries to forget about all those resistances, everything that holds him in check. The soccer ball arcs away from him, dangling for a moment within the rim of the blurry sun, a mini-eclipse. Then it dips to earth as any object must. After they finish

playing, the boys go inside to take a little nap. His wife makes hamburger patties for him to grill. Les takes a beer from the fridge and goes back out to light the charcoal. The soccer ball rests against the back fence. Les takes a long look at it sitting there so peacefully.

Les often said things to his class that made them look at him a little funny. They weren't on his frequency. "Right now the forces of the universe want to push you down on your asses," he said once. Titters and gasps, the typical teenage response. "Is this a joke? No. Let yourself feel it. Relax your muscles. Feel the pressure. Only the chair is keeping you from being driven into the earth. When you think about it, this is our natural state—flat on our ass, pinned to the ground." They called him Dr. Destructo because he liked to take them out on the soccer field and hurl all kind of things—cantaloupes, eggs, Barry Manilow CDs—with his miniature catapult. His students wouldn't admit this, but they enjoyed these days, and ran around marking off distances where something had splattered with real enthusiasm. "Now you know that Galileo wasn't all serious business," Les said. "Maybe he just wanted to break stuff."

He taught physics at the "good" high school, which meant that African Americans were in a clear minority. When he looked at his students he thought: you have it easy. You will go to college without taking out massive loans, loaf around, drink or do drugs, screw and screw up without any real repercussions for your future. What did they know about suffering? They didn't know their ass from a hole in the ground. So he would tell them about the theories of Ernst Mach, who fought a battle with Newton's idea of space and motion his whole life. "Here's the scenario that Mach imagines," Les said. "What if you are in a place completely devoid of light? No stars, no Milky Way, no air, just absolute darkness. This is not just a dark room. This is

emptiness. Now if you were suddenly set spinning, would you even know it? Spinning or not-spinning—what's the difference without some reference point?"

And then one of his brighter students, Jimmy what's- his- name, the kid who wore his golf visor backwards and upside down, said, "But this is just theoretical. It can't happen. It's just like . . . a dream."

"Maybe," Les replied, "it's what heaven is like."

Les's connection was an old acquaintance from his band days, a guy who played at being roadie but ultimately became more interested in the pharmaceutical side of the business. Normally Les made pretty simple requests—grass mainly—and they had become pretty infrequent over the years. Les was more responsible now—children, wife, job—so Steve, the old acquaintance, found Les's latest need a surprise. His thin mustache, cut so close it looked as though it was drawn on by a Sharpie, arched to make a circumflex.

"Is this going to be difficult?" Les asked. They were eating pancakes at IHOP.

"Have you tried mixing the butter pecan and the blueberry? It's compelling," Steve said as he swabbed a hunk of pancake in a pool of purple syrup.

Les carefully cut his pancakes into quadrants and waited for Steve to get around to answering.

"That's kind of weird," Steve said, pointing at Les's handiwork, the precise rows that looked like they had been measured. "You eat pancakes like a serial killer."

"It's just the way I do it." Les stopped eating, self conscious as Steve probably meant him to be.

"I'm not saying I can't get it," Steve continued. "Dentist's offices are like . . . a piece of cake. Some of these places don't even have alarms. I'm saying the request is abnormal and I'm almost on the verge of breaking a cardinal rule which is to ask . . . Well, what the fuck is up? I'm guessing you aren't pimping your Corolla."

"You are right. You shouldn't ask. And are you sure you have to break in?"

"Well, there are legal channels, but I kind of need to keep my name away from suspicious purchases. And like I said, easy-peasy, best and most economical way to get what you want. If you are going to be tight lipped then you shouldn't ask either. We'll both just pretend we are good buddies catching up on old times."

"Okay then."

"But laughing gas, Les? That stuff will seriously fuck you up. You've read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, right?"

"Maybe I want to laugh."

Out back, Les stood pinging the twines of the rake while he listened to an argument some neighbors were having. Every other word seemed to be "motherfucker." Leaves smothered the grass. Across the cut that ran beyond his back fence he saw the back of an old brick apartment building, the purplish red of a scab. "Projects brick" his father called it, disgusted and ashamed of this emblem of poverty. The duplex Les grew up in was this same shade. And now he could look out from his backyard and wonder exactly how far had he come.

Les could not tell if the arguers lived there in the apartments or somewhere closer, a door or two to the left or right. It was hard to judge sound. He could not figure what it was about anyway, no matter how hard he listened. "Motherfucker . . . You never . . . Motherfucking fuck

it, I'm tired of this shit." And underneath this was the insistent bleating of the frogs that lived in the brackish water which gathered down in the ditch. The water was algae brown, but shimmered like gasoline in the late afternoon sun. "What am I doing here . . . What the fuck." It was painful to listen to. Les concentrated on the satisfying scrape he made, the growing piles of leaves, slightly damp, aromatic with decay.

He noticed that the salvia was huge and still bright with color, each flower a delicate red flute that seemed to pulse with light. The hydrangea, though, was no longer a powdery blue but the moist rust of something abandoned. Pecans littered the ground. He had spent the fall gathering them up for his wife's baking, but they were not particularly good this year. It went in cycles he'd heard somewhere. Another bit of esoteric knowledge that floated around in his head. He bent to pick one up. The soft guava green casing was still intact, and he peeled it off. Now the bitter shell before he could finally get to the meat. He pressed it hard in his hand and the shell disintegrated; it was rotten inside, the lobe all black dust.

The shouting stopped and Les realized that evening was enclosing him in a nimbus of quiet. The kitchen's light was soft and buttery. Light was always worth studying, the constant, essential fact of the universe, he told his students. He stood there and watched his house, waited to be called inside. Waited for some affirmation.

*

The last night he stood just outside the spilling glow of the kitchen, smelling his wife's baking.

His wife was humming a song he recognized as one he had written while in his college band, Garbage In Garbage Out. They'd met at a concert. No one had ever watched him so

intensely before. He had always felt he did not stand out, yet there she was, her eyes nibbling away on him. It didn't matter that she wasn't really good looking.

He could clearly see her now from across the dining room. Her face looked scrubbed raw, the blood high in her cheeks as though she had just taken a run through cold, unforgiving weather. Her hair was limp, the lackluster brown of cardboard; wet sheaves of it stuck to her neck. Still, she looked so happy and focused upon her project that Les felt he had been stabbed by his love for her.

He was hidden from her in his nook, this corner where the latticed door could be pulled back to touch the wall and enclose him. He looked through refracted light, strained light he liked to think of it, as though the seeing was enhanced by a barrier. When he was a child he was fascinated by the sheath of ice he found in puddles and bird baths in early winter; he would hold it up to the sickly late afternoon sun hoping to find some vision. He was still looking he guessed. He felt a deep keening building within him. He was here. They were there, far away it seemed. His wife was intent upon her cakes and the boys were in the bathroom, brushing teeth, washing faces, the general routine of bedtime. All this could go on without him, he thought, a perpetual motion once set going. Life was motion and repetition; it was doing and doing even if you never stopped to wonder why. They did not need him to tell them to brush for two minutes or to stretch their mouth wide and make flat circular stokes. How many more lessons were there to impart?

"Hey Les," his wife called, "where are you?"

For a moment he stood very still, afraid and embarrassed to make his position known.

"Come lick the icing," she said. "It's too late for the boys to have anything sweet." A muffled howl of indignity came from the bathroom.

"It's strawww-berry," she said in a way that was meant to be playful, but he could hear a tone of uncertainty, perhaps even some slight alarm creeping in. Something seemed to resonate in the silence. *What was he doing now*, she was wondering.

"I know," he said quietly, stepping out from his hiding place. "I can smell it." He walked into the kitchen and tried to put on a smile. "So what's the occasion? Sweet sixteen?"

His wife looked at him suspiciously, then turned back to the frothy pink cake she was icing. "Well aren't you just acting most peculiar."

Les gave her a "Who, me?" look.

"Skulking about like some murderer. I mean it, Les," she said and lowered her voice so the boys wouldn't hear. "It's just weird. The other night I wake up god knows when and you're standing there at the window, just looking out. What were you looking at?"

"Insomnia again. That's all. Nothing unusual for me. Now I was promised icing, wasn't I? Isn't that just like a woman to dangle icing before a man and then snatch it away because he's not acting right?"

She seemed reassured and relaxed a bit, gave him a smile and pushed her hand through her sweaty locks. "Do you want the bowl or the beaters?"

"The beaters, of course. They are more of a challenge for the tongue."

"So you're not going to tell me what you were doing just now?" She looked at him, resentful and loving, perhaps not so odd a combination. He was a handful sometimes, he knew.

"Spacing out, that's what I was doing." He glanced down at the kitchen table and the neatly ordered stacks of paper: bills. His eye flicked across a line of numbers, shocking every time, even though he knew them by heart every month. And what was the point in thinking about it now, anyway? It occurred to Les how the shapes of numbers could so easily resemble

weapons, instruments of torture. A four was an axe, nine a club, one a sword, five a sinewy whip, all ready to tenderize and puncture with their specific realities, densities, and edges. Certainly his students must feel this way, considering how they groaned and winced through his tests. How he had once loved numbers when he thought they were the arbiters of life itself. Now just another balance due. He would pay it somehow.

"Don't look. It doesn't do any good," Les's wife said.

"I'm a glutton for punishment." Padding then bounding sounds came from the hallway. China cups quivered in the pie safe. Paintings found themselves suddenly askew.

"Rascals," Les cried. "Devil children not of my seed." The boys were laughing and waiting for him. He went hesitantly with a smile on his face.

*

Out at the lake, Les stood on the beach. The sand was stiff from the cold and crunched under his feet. It had been cold all week, sometimes below freezing. A skirt of slushy ice clung to the shore. This time of year there were no boats to make waves. Farther out, the water looked thick and sculpted like the icing on one of his wife's cakes. He felt that if he stood there long enough it would all freeze up and he could step out and start walking. He watched himself walk until he was nothing but a dark spot. The screeches of birds pierced the still air, calling him back. It occurred to him that he could name the smallest particles, neutrinos and quarks, so infinitesimal they could never be seen, only imagined, and yet he didn't know what kind of birds these were. The amorphous, shifting cloud of wings wheeled above him. They swooped and dipped in perfect coordination. They gamboled for him, then suddenly with a flash of brown breasts they veered skyward and were gone.

Back in the trunk of his car he had the tank, tubing, duct tape, and a heavy trash bag. The birds were gone. He treaded carefully back toward the car as though the earth was a pudding skin, as though he might break through at any moment.

Les's wife places the loaf of bread on her kitchen table, alongside the cakes and casseroles, the feeble offerings of obligation and concern. She can tell by the heft of the sour dough, the tightly wrapped saran wrap, that it came from Hirschberger's, the Mennonite bakery. Hardly any of the women who visit her all day can cook for themselves. They come to her when they need a fancy birthday cake or something to put out for book club. She charges outrageous prices, and the women do not bat an eye. Les hated to see them. They parked their silver and champagne toned Tahoes and Suburbans, their hulking Hummers there in front of the house and stood on his porch, looking back over their shoulders with distaste. Perhaps at Mrs. Bandy across the street who sat on her porch with her oxygen cylinder and her dog Bobo, a wizened Chihuahua that coughed convulsively rather than barked. Or maybe they glanced in disapproval at the pontoon boat parked in the front yard of another neighbor the Hoops, Jaimie and Stella. Sometimes Jaimie stood out on his porch in a wife beater and hoisted a beer and smoked. They might also have grimaced at the chorus of the hound dogs that resided somewhere behind Mrs. Bandy's house. No, Les would not have liked to see all these women and she catches herself thinking that she is glad he is not here and the tears come again hard and sudden.

After she composes herself, she goes to check on Mikey. He has been under his bed since the night before. She cannot get him to come out. She puts some cookies on a plate and slides them into the darkness. He says nothing, but she hears a crunch and is satisfied so she lets him

be. At least he isn't crying now, though she has occasionally heard a sob or a shudder. Her other son Dylan, the oldest, is in his room frozen in front of the window, staring at something on the back lawn. He is like those men they saw all over New Orleans while on vacation the previous summer. They made their living as statues, ignoring the world, their bodies fixed, their stare on some distant and unknowable thing. One was painted silver, she remembers, his clothes, too, and he had toy six shooters on his hips. He stood across from Café Du Monde where all the tourists gorged on beignets. Sometimes people would stop, mirror his motionlessness, and look for something in his sad and depthless eyes. A pleading was there but also a resistance.

Les's wife deflects the urge to ask her son what he sees. The answer might be too much for her. Instead she checks on her youngest again.

"Are you comfy?"

"Yes." The boy sniffs and hiccups. "It's dusty, though."

"You are under a bed."

"I might come out."

"Take your time," she says. "I'm tempted to come down with you." After she leaves her son, she starts to wash plates, a harmless enough pastime, one that has the feeling of work at least, of life getting on. But no, she is just as bad as Dylan. She finds herself looking intently on the expanse of the back yard, knowing this was the yard that Les raked clean only a few weeks before. Typical of him to wait so long. She was always after him, the honey-do list tacked to the refrigerator. But on the far edge of the lawn, something. It looks like a milky spot. Forlorn. It is an object awaiting motion. Now she knows what her son is looking at.

CHAPTER 14:

PARSIMONY

Cookie's idea of a good meal was one with no leftovers. No waste, no overstuffed stomachs; no need to unbuckle, unbutton and lean back with a sated groan. Not in her house. Whenever the children pleaded for something at the store, some tasty morsel, she always responded, "Why? You'll just eat it." She didn't believe in waste or excess. She allowed herself one cigarette a day and sat smoking it on the veranda after the children hurried off to walk the half mile to St. Dominic's. Three and more to come, though the last ones asphyxiated in the womb, blue shipwrecks. She kept the cigarettes in the freezer so the tobacco would not get stale.

They rebelled in small ways.

Candice went off to college and gorged herself in the cafeteria. She ate worthless things like lime Jello with a dollop of whipped cream on top. She made numerous trips back to the soft serve ice cream machine and always told the kerchiefed cooks to drench her chicken fried steak with gravy. When she came home for Christmas that first semester pudgy and satisfied Cookie said, "We must watch our figure, dear," and shot sidelong glances at her during meal time.

Ann fell in love with a boy who could eat for both of them. After they married, she made the richest cream sauces, chose the fattiest cuts of meat, and watched him balloon from year to year. Finally he just sat in his chair in the den, too swollen with love to even come to the table anymore.

Once, Haney, the littlest, dumped far too much ketchup on his plate, forming a lagoon around his cube steak. “Waste not, want not,” Cookie said and made him eat every clotted bite. Well after bed time, Haney sat, the pool of ketchup staring up at him like the bubbling witch’s cauldron in his fairy tale books. Finally, his father came in from reading the paper and set him free.

“For god’s sake, why?” he asked as they got ready for bed that night. “We’re not poor. I make a good living, don’t I?” Cookie just smiled, suddenly beautiful now as she once was the day he sailed into San Francisco harbor, all his mines swept and sunk down deep in the shimmering ocean behind him. How like a vision! But he turned away because he’d eaten a donut from his private hiding place. The powder still stuck to his lips like the remnants of some sin.

CHAPTER 15:

LOVE'S AUSTERE AND LONELY OFFICES

1

Luke held the Mason jar up to the light, and the finger, cut just below the knuckle, spun slowly, mesmerizing him. The skin was a dusty brown, like the shell of a pecan, and motes of dirt and sand floated around it, shimmering; jagged bone poked out from a chunk of salmon red flesh.

"What is it?" his brother Danny asked.

"It's a finger, you idjit. Can't you see? It's somebody's finger."

"Yep," Father said. "Woman at the cannery. We shut down the line and I went into the pit to fish it out. A real mess. Took her over to the hospital and tried to give the doctors the finger, but they didn't have no use for it. Ruthie didn't neither. Just said, 'What I want to look at that thing? Ain't no more mine than yours, now.'"

Danny scrunched his nose. "Gross."

"They couldn't put it back on?" Luke asked. "Can't they sew it back on?"

"There's too many nerves is what the docs said. Said they was just getting around to figuring out how to do it."

Until then Mother wasn't involved in the conversation because she was taking a casserole out of the oven. Now she came over to see what the ruckus was about and caught her breath when she saw the grotesque bobbing digit.

"What on earth are you doing bringing such a thing home, Luther? Tell me right now."

Father shrugged, his face a little redder than usual. "Don't know. Thought the boys might get a kick out of it."

"Can we keep it in our room?" Luke said.

"No way." Danny balked. "What if . . . what if the finger gets lonely and wants to go find all its brothers and sisters?"

"God, you're stupid."

Father was looking at Mother, though, trying to determine something. He wasn't in a good mood anymore.

"I don't like it," she said. "And nigger to boot."

"Don't see how that makes a difference," Father said.

"Fine." After she jerked around the corner, they stood listening for the loud chunk of an ice pick, the clink in the glass. Luke knew that he could keep the finger, but there would be hell to pay for someone. At the moment, he didn't care. The notion entered his head that one day he would be able to do miraculous things.

"I'd like to be able to help that woman," he said.

"Go on back to your room." Father sighed and drew his face into his usual impassive mask. "It's been a long day."

2

July was the busy month at the cannery. Many days Father took Luke and Danny over with him. He always had a task in mind for them. They were the only ones small enough to fit into the sugar tanks, so they spent long afternoons scrubbing out the sticky, dim interiors. They

wore swim trunks and stood in knee deep sudsy water, which burned their hands and eyes because it also had bleach in it along with the harsh soap. At the end of the day their fingers felt worn smooth; weeks afterward they picked strands of skin off their legs and arms.

Sometimes Father had them cleaning around the assembly line, picking up the peaches that occasionally rolled off, bruised and leaking their sweetness and attracting insects. Wasps were a constant problem at the cannery. Nests were all over—papery cornucopias full of mean red wasps. Their favorite and most dangerous job was to get rid of these nests. Father gave them a Planter's can and a milk jug full of gasoline. Luke would pour the gas into the can and then carefully sling it on the nest. This was surprisingly effective but also liable to get the boys stung if the aim was off just a little. Danny pouted when Luke relegated him to gasoline holder. He desperately wanted to kill some wasps, too, nagging Luke incessantly until one day Luke finally gave in. Having a notion that Danny wouldn't get the job done correctly, he began easing back. Danny only hit enough of the nest to set the wasps upon him, turning tail but not fast enough. One stung him on the brow, another on his lip. Unfortunately, Danny had the tendency to swell, so he looked something like Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera* by the time they found Father. He got some ice and let Danny lie down on the lime green couch in his office. "Let's not tell your mother about this," he said. "About the gasoline and all, anyway. Can't escape the fact that you look like hell, son." Luke and his father shared a little smile.

For some reason Father was always a more relaxed at the cannery. He walked down the belt, gabbing with the workers, mostly middle-aged black women who called him "Mister Red." His big ruddy cheeks gleamed when he smiled. He told the women jokes that made them say, "Hush now, Mister Red. We workin." Luke wondered if one of his father's jokes made Ruthie Jenkins look up and giggle, causing her to keep her finger on the peach a second too long, just

enough for the press to come down and slice it right off. Was this why Father went to so much effort to recover the curled, bloated digit that now sat on Luke's desk, twirling ever so slightly in the glass of alcohol? Perhaps his father felt responsible. Ruthie never showed any sign of disliking Father, though. In fact, she waved her four good fingers when he walked down the line.

Sometimes Luke watched his father when he sat at his desk writing figures with a red pencil in wide account books. His tongue stuck out a little; a look of profound concentration furrowed his brow. This was hard work for him, but he did it just the same. Luke realized that this was the look he gave Mother when he was particularly exasperated with her. For instance, when she would make them move the same heavy wardrobe or grandfather clock from one wall to next, all because Mother "felt like a change was in order." Usually, the piece of furniture went back to its initial resting place. "That woman," Father would say under his breath.

3

School was fast approaching, and they had to get vaccinations. When Doc Whitley drew a shot, Luke watched him closely—the gentle tap he gave the syringe, the little jet of fluid when Doc eased his thumb over the plunger. Luke eyed the needle as it went in his arm.

"It's better not to look," Whitley said. "Hurts less."

"It doesn't bother me." The whole process fascinated him, so much that he watched when Danny was given his shots as well, though Danny made terrible grimaces and contortions.

"Baby." Danny stuck his tongue at him. "Wussy."

"Now you boys are a-okay," Whitley said. "No measles and mumps for you." However, Danny got chicken pox soon after and suffered heroically. In the evenings of that week, Mother

fussed over Danny, giving him ice cream and making compresses for his head, though Luke could see no medical rationale for either.

"Let me pop one," he said to Danny. "I promise it won't hurt." The sight of a puss filled blister erupting like a geyser was immensely interesting.

"Get away. Get away. Maaa." Danny had no sense of scientific curiosity.

His father came down the hall, heavy work boots resounding on the wood floor. The Grandfather clock inadvertently struck the hour.

"What do I have to do to get some peace and quiet?" His face was flushed almost as red as his hair, usually combed into a pompadour, now mussed after a day at the cannery. "You want a whoopin?"

"No sir."

"Well all right then. Behave."

"What's going on now? Is Danny okay?" Mother called from the kitchen. She was making something for dinner, judging from the smell, but Luke mainly heard the tinkling of ice. She'd poured herself the first drink well before Father had come home.

"Sorry, Dad. I was just kidding around." Luke kept his eyes firmly on the carpet of the room he shared with Danny. He'd had his own room, but when he turned eight, Father claimed it, not giving any reason why he would no longer sleep with Mother. Luke suspected that he had been kicked out because of his tremendous snoring, which Luke was well aware of, having spent many camping trips at Jocassee wedged between his father and Uncle Roy, also a snorer.

Occasionally, when Luke had to get up and pee in the middle of the night, he heard his father talking in his sleep. Sometimes he was laughing; others he seemed to be crying out in fear or pain. Luke wondered what he dreamed about, but guessed it had something to do with the war.

There was a picture of his father standing with his crew before the nose of a B-24. A half-naked woman pouted right above his head. She had horns and a devil's tail. Luke longed to question him about the plane. What was it like to fly through the clouds? How did he keep from being scared with all those bombs and bullets flying past him? How did it feel when the plane fell from the sky—the rush of metal and glass and flesh? But his father never offered a word, and Luke didn't ask.

4

August began to flare out and school was lurking. And something else—a disruption to the usual order of their household. Luke's grandfather moved in with them. There was no explanation. One day Father showed up with him and he began to sleep on the couch in the living room. The old man was very sick. He wore a transparent mask attached to an olive green cylinder. Late at night, Luke could hear him coughing, long wet coughs that foretold death.

"What's wrong with you, Granpappy?" Luke asked.

"Just the usual results of a life of whorin and debauchery."

From the kitchen his mother yelled, "Alistair." She came out into the hallway that connected the living room with the back of the house and glared at Luke's grandfather. "We already had this discussion. If I had my way, you'd still be rotting in the VA with the rest of the hobos."

"Your approval don't mean nothing to me." No love was lost between Mother and Granpappy. Sometimes in the evening, his father and Granpappy sat in the backyard and smoked. Father never told Granpappy what he could or could not do, though this habit could not

have been good for his rotten lungs. Father just watched him quietly, as though the silence held some deep conversation only they could partake in.

5

At age eleven, Luke was allowed to dress himself, but he still had to seek final approval from Mother before heading off to school. He stood along with Danny in the doorway of her room while their father made sandwiches. She was quick to note a pair of socks which did not match a sweater vest, even if she still appeared to be shaking off the haze of a deep sleep. The four poster bed was raised high off of the ground, making her appear like a queen on her throne. There was even a small step ladder and a thick lamb's wool rug so she did not have to walk on the cold bare floor. Gossamer strands of red hair escaped from her kerchief, matching her swollen eyes, always tender on these early mornings. But they could turn hard and clear easily enough.

"Come closer," she said to Danny, as if she wanted to inspect some small detail of the stitching on his cowboy shirt. "Are you color blind? Good lord! Are you common trash? My son is Howdy Doody." Whenever Mother made objections like this, Luke would dutifully change, not really aware of his own sense of style, just aware that he must appease in order to be set loose from her gaze. Danny would often choose to argue, a fatal mistake because it caused her to get up from her dais and tromp to the closet with her hand firmly around the back of his neck.

"But Ma, I like this shirt," Danny protested. Luke had learned this lesson quickly and listened from the solace of the kitchen to Danny being violently undressed and dressed. Father sipped coffee and kept his opinion to himself.

The reason she did not take them to school like other mothers was simple—she had not yet learned to drive and wouldn't for many more years. In truth, though, even if she could have driven them, she wouldn't stand for looking so disheveled in public. She never did anything fast, especially on those weekday mornings, so their father dropped them at RC Edwards Elementary on his way to the cannery.

The lunches he packed were usually functional and bland: bologna sandwiches without the red strip of plastic peeled off, apples or peaches that came home from Harvin Brothers. Luke had eaten enough peaches that summer to be sick of them forever. Sometimes, for inexplicable reasons, they would find a strange concoction instead of the usual fare—mayonnaise, peanut butter, and banana or deviled ham mixed with vast quantities of relish slapped on Wonder Bread.

"Do good, boys," Father said as Luke and Danny piled out of the cab of the rusty Ford pickup, rucksacks and paper bag lunches and school projects encumbering them. "Try hard." As if Luke needed this injunction. He never made below a 90 on any test, agonized over every word of a composition because he had decided he would be a doctor like Uncle Roy or Doc Whitley. Luke knew that doctors had to be smart, so he was diligent.

Every afternoon while Danny wheedled and whined about the multiplication tables and flash cards, Luke burrowed into a new batch of homework. He did not particularly enjoy school, seeing it really as a means to an end, but he experienced satisfaction in untangling a tricky word problem, all the numbers laid out in neat rows, or drawing an insect and labeling each part: thorax, antenna, mandible. Some words had a magical cadence. He internalized the diagram of the human body in his textbook as if it were a map. There were dead ends and busy streets, forgotten landmarks and stately edifices. The trachea was a main thoroughfare forking into

bronchi, a warren of side roads. Capillaries and veins, the brain and its lobes, the strange and useless appendix; all named, all brightly colored and seductive.

He had already held a heart—not human but a deer's heart—brought to school by Mrs. Erlich, whose husband was a taxidermist. The heart fit in his hand like a soft ball. It was a little damp, harder than he imagined, and rubbery from the formaldehyde. He fingered the striated muscle, the stiff valves.

"This is your engine," Mrs. Erlich said. "Everything is dependent on this organ. Your brain can't think if the heart doesn't keep pumping. So for all your smarts, remember you'd be nothing without a heart."

6

Granpappy had been a conductor on the Southern Railway and before that an infantry man in the Great War. Luke loved to listen to his stories because they always seemed to involve some inexplicable violence.

"Did I tell you about the headless tramp I found once?"

"No." Luke's eyes widened.

"This poor fella was probably moving from one car to another and didn't see the bridge comin. Took his head clean off, pop, like you snap a chicken's head off. Had to stop the train and go look for it, of course. Found it face down in the mud a few miles back."

"How'd you bring the head back?"

"Ohh, just yanked it up by the short hairs and carried it back. A head is heavier'n you might think. When I got back up to the engine, the brakeman is looking out all spooked, shining

his lantern into the darkness, and I held the head up when the light swung my way. You should have seen that boy. Couldn't even scream. Jest froze like a statue."

Luke sat, imagining Granpappy waving the head high: the glazed eyes and the tongue pink and solid as an eraser.

"Did you look in his eyes?" This thought intrigued him. "What do you see in a dead man's eyes?"

"Nothing at all. It's like looking in the eyes of an animal you've kilt. All hazy. Your father has taken you to kill a buck, ain't he?"

Luke shook his head slowly. He had only gone with Uncle Fifer once to a field to shoot doves. Fifer behaved strangely, had started to cry after the first barrage of gunfire. As Luke was rubbing his shoulder from the recoil, he noticed Fifer on his knees, sobbing, the gun thrown out in front of him, useless and foreign. His cousins carried him away, saying, "Shoulda known better" and then Luke saw very little of Fifer, except for the family picnic when he ran across the lawn, screaming, "Incoming. Get down. Get down." Mother would never admit that her brother had behaved so queerly. So Luke kept the secret and said nothing. He shook his head.

"Well," Granpappy said. He was quiet for a moment. "I'll tell you what it's like then. It's the skin of ice you scoop from a puddle in the early winter. Those eyes looked just like that." He coughed and smiled and seemed very pleased with himself.

7

"Should I try out for the JV team next year?" Luke sat with his father in the den watching the Giants play the Bears. Those fall Sundays he observed his father almost as much as he watched the television. Father invested some deep part of himself in all the games, but he liked

the Giants best. If they ever lost, Luke knew to stay out of his way for a few days. But why pull for a team up in New York? Had he been there once? Luke didn't know and could never get a straight answer.

Father looked up from the game absently. "Maybe so. Guess you're getting the Caldwell beef."

Luke was husky and short, unlike Danny who was tall and skinny like Fifer and the other men on Mother's side of the family. But Danny had Father's cleft chin and the orange-red hair, what some called auburn. Luke's hair was dark as loam and curly. His face was the imprint of his father's, though. Big cheeks and a perfectly straight aquiline nose, like Ronald Reagan in the Gipper movie. Even with the resemblance, Luke couldn't help but feel he was nothing like him. He decided he would go out for football, imagined his father standing on the sideline cheering him on.

"Would you come watch me?"

The question was lost in his father's grumbling. The Giants had just given up the go-ahead touchdown.

8

In the beginning of summer, they got the obligatory crew cut, but in the fall they went up to the college for a trim every month. Their father was at home in the barbershop; the other men all knew his name. Dennis, the barber, would say, "Well, look who we have here. Big Red Caldwell. An honor and a pleasure." Dennis chain smoked and talked as much as he cut hair, but no one minded. In fact, many of the men did not even seem to need haircuts at all. They nursed coca-colas and shot the bull. Luke was fascinated in particular by one of the men. Everyone

called him Stokes. Stokes sat in a corner smiling but never saying a word. Something about him wasn't right. To Luke, he looked like a big baby, with his rolly-polly body and stubby arms and legs. But Stokes also had a thin bristly mustache and a hump of fat around his neck that made him seem a gross caricature of a baby, a grown man pretending to be a child. And he behaved childishly, as well. Stokes would whistle like a bird and rock back and forth. The whistles, his mellifluous tweeting, came unexpectedly, in brief pauses in the conversation or after someone made a particularly vehement point. The first time Luke observed the odd behavior, he whispered, "What's wrong with him? Is he crazy?"

His father looked at him hard, didn't reply for almost a minute. "Don't you worry about it. He's harmless enough." Luke knew not to broach the subject further.

Eventually he learned his father's relationship to Stokes. Danny was in the chair and had his eyes shut because Dennis was waving the razor in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Once Dennis had nicked Danny and he yelped and Father told him to behave like a man. From then on Danny just knit his eyes closed and held onto the chair tightly while Dennis shaved his nape. So Danny did not see Stokes keel over on the floor and begin writhing like a cockroach. But Luke did. He saw it as if in slow motion—the men gathering around Stokes, his tongue fleshy and alive, twitching in the corner of his mouth. Father knelt down, pulled Stokes's mouth open, and jammed a comb between his teeth. He told Dennis to call an ambulance. When the men in white came to take Stokes, Father helped them strap him onto the gurney and walked out with them. Luke stood at the door beside Dennis.

"I guess your father has always looked out for Stokes after what happened." Luke eyed Dennis. "He hadn't ever told you?"

"No."

"Well, Stokes was the manager on the team when your daddy was playing. And a finer center there hasn't been since. But Stokes was always a little strange, and the players were keen on playing jokes on him, so one day they up and throw him in the pond by the practice field. Only Stokes couldn't swim, but they didn't know that. So they laugh and walk off, but Stokes isn't able to get back to shore because they've thrown him way out in the middle. Lucky your Daddy comes along and sees an arm flailing about, so he jumps in and saves Stokes. Never was right afterward, tetched, as they say. Coaches covered up the affair, of course. So he never told you about being the hero, huh?" The ambulance was gone down the hill now, its siren winding softer in the distance.

"We was all very proud of your Daddy when he got that professional contract," Dennis continued. "Course the war and all."

Suddenly there was Father, his jaw grim, implacable. "Let's go."

"Nice work." Dennis let out a wheezy laugh. Some other men slapped Father on the shoulder.

"Go on." He motioned with his arm toward the parking lot. They began walking.

"That man—he was really sick," Danny said.

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Now you get in the car and keep quiet."

Why, Luke thought, was he mad at us? And when they got home, Danny began to say something about the exciting events and Father gave him the look they both knew. So nothing more was said about Stokes. But all that coming week Father was late for dinner. He said the cannery had to run overtime.

9

After school they often were left to their own devices because Mother kicked them out of the house when they finished homework. The zoysia in the backyard had lost its luxuriant padding and was now bristly and hard. The woods back beyond their father's garden had taken on the hue of an old penny. There was nowhere to hide to play cowboys and Indians; the creek was too cold to dam. They found other diversions.

"Let's do an experiment," Luke said. Danny looked at him expectantly. Luke had managed to sneak a pack of his mother's Alka Seltzer into his pocket. "Try it."

"What'll it do?"

"It gives you a fizzy feeling in your stomach. It's good." Luke convinced him by getting a coke from the outside pantry.

"Drink it down with this."

Danny did as he was told.

"How do you feel?"

"Okay."

"Now jump up and down."

"Why?"

"I want to see if foam comes out of your mouth."

"Really?" Danny began to do jumping jacks, clapping his hands above his head. Then, abruptly, he doubled over as though he's been punched in the gut.

"Ahhhhh," he screamed.

Luke couldn't help but snicker. What a dupe. "What's wrong, buddy?"

"Ahhhhh." Danny pressed his stomach, trying to keep his insides from flying out. Then he began to belch, watery and loud.

"Keep it down. You'll be all right. Don't be a wimp." Too late. Mother came out of the house. She seemed a little unsteady, swaying atop her high heels as she surveyed the yard.

"What on earth? What's wrong, Danny?" Playing the situation for all it was worth, Danny just groaned and stayed put. Later, after Danny was ensconced happily in bed with another worthless compress soothing his brow, Mother was able to get everything out of him. Luke hung outside the door of their room awaiting his punishment.

"Just wait until your Father gets home." Mother never dealt with matters herself, but promised a spanking from their father's shovel-like hand. The anticipation of a beating was worse than the actual pain. When he was younger, Luke once slipped a pie pan into his pants, hoping to dull the force of the blows. This was a mistake because Father only hit him harder when he realized what Luke had done. Really, though, it was that look on Father's face that haunted him, that fury that signaled some kind of deep disappointment, as though Father knew the whipping would never get Luke to behave the way he should.

While he awaited his punishment, he sat with Granpappy and listened to Amos'n Andy on the radio. They had a T.V., but Granpappy vowed never to watch it, said it perverted the imagination.

"These niggers," Granpappy said. "They crack me up."

Luke could hardly concentrate. He kept thinking of his father's scowling face.

"What you done? Gonna get the rod, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Granpappy coughed and hawked a gob of what looked like tar into the fire place. It sizzled for a moment.

"Look at my toes," he said, uncovering a scaly foot from underneath his blanket. "Go on. Look." The nails were thick and wavy, the dirty yellow of ear wax. The right big toe was crooked. The other toes curled back like the claws of some albino crow. "That's from standing in water and mud and shit. Pardon. Just think ever day of walking on these feet. Ever day waking up to an ache somewheres."

Luke didn't know what to say. He went into the kitchen, and Mother put some peanut butter on graham crackers for him to eat. She'd had another drink and was calmer now. Luke promised himself that he wouldn't cry, no matter how much it hurt. Later, when Father came home, he heard Mother explain the situation in the kitchen. There was a long silence it seemed. Luke wondered if Father was too angry to speak. He cringed.

"Why's it always got to be me, Anne?" Father finally said in a low voice.

"You know how these boys get into it. Am I supposed to keep track of them every second? Am I entirely responsible?"

"Boys is boys."

Then Mother hissed something sharp and pointed.

In a few minutes, Father came to get him. He laid his hand on the back of Luke's head and led him down the hall to his bedroom. The bed was neatly made, everything spare and in order. It was as though his father didn't live here at all, but was some boarder who had to take pains to conceal any mess, any trace of himself.

"You know what you done."

"Yes sir."

"All right." Father spanked him but without the usual passion. Luke didn't cry. He didn't say a thing.

10

Close to Christmas, Granpappy began to fade. They took him to the hospital in Easley where Uncle Roy practiced. Roy had a lot of money and owned a big white Victorian house with a gazebo in the backyard. He hadn't once come over to visit Granpappy. With good reason, said Mother, because Granpappy was a no account who abandoned his family when they needed him most. When Father heard her say such things, he just kept his head down, looked hard at something only he could see.

They were all arranged around Granpappy's bed, waiting for him to die. He looked like a crumpled cigarette in his hospital gown, jaundiced and thin as a knotted stick. Luke couldn't help but see those toes peeking out from under the blanket, and he shuddered and looked away. Danny fidgeted in the corner, and Mother told him to sit still.

"Ya'll makin me nervous," Granpappy said. "Ain't my funeral jest yet." Uncle Roy breezed through the door holding a manila folder. Father nodded at him.

"Well lookee who finally came to see me," Granpappy said.

"Not by choice," said Roy. He glanced through the contents of the folder, then turned to Father. "You still letting him smoke?"

"Time or two."

"And drink?"

"Not unless he's gotten into Anne's sherry." Mother coughed and gave Father a jabbing look that Roy ignored. Uncle Roy was all business at the moment.

"So, what's the prognosis, Doc," Granpappy said, arching his eyebrow in a leering way.

"Oh, you're too mean to die just yet, that's what I think." He paused. "But one can hope."

"Look here, Roy." Father was not as tall, but he had Roy by fifty pounds. He stood close to him now. The brothers looked into each other's eyes.

"I have my reasons, and you know why," Roy said.

Father's body seemed to relent and unbow. Roy turned away from them and looked out the window. He seemed to be watching the traffic below.

"There's no reason to keep him at the hospital. We can't do a thing. Best for him to go on home."

11

Late Christmas night, well after Mother and Father were asleep, Luke and Danny sat rigid in their beds, listening to the old man's ragged pull, his wheezes and coughs. Usually, they crept down the hall and played with their toys, only slinking back to their beds just before day break, pretending yawns when Father came to wake them, and feigning surprise at the bow and arrows, cap guns, and GI Joes they were already intimately familiar with. But tonight they were hesitant.

"Do you think he's still awake?" Danny said.

"I don't know."

Finally, they couldn't take it. They padded down the hall and looked around the corner. They had to pass an open space connecting the living room to the kitchen. After that they were home free; the den and the Christmas tree awaited. Granpappy lay on the couch facing them. The

blue flame of the gas logs flickered across his face. Luke still couldn't tell if he was asleep or awake.

"I'm going," Danny said and hurried across. Granpappy didn't move. Luke decided to take his chance as well. But for some reason, he looked back when he was at the door. Granpappy was grinning at him in a malevolent way. He put his index finger to his desiccated lips. The gas flames hissed and his eyes gleamed black as obsidian, saying "We will keep our secrets. We will keep our silences."

12

By the spring Granpappy still hadn't died. Mother was restless. In the evenings when Father came home, they all sat eating and slowly chewing as quietly as possible because the very sound seemed an affront to her. She had something on her mind. She looked after Father with a pursed lip when he went into the living room to sit with Granpappy.

"Wouldn't it be nice," she said one evening, "to have a patio out back? You and your Daddy could just while away the time in peace."

Father looked up from his plate and considered the idea. "That's what you want, Anne?"

"I think it would be lovely to have a patio."

Father put his fork and knife down. "All right then. That's what you'll get."

The day the concrete truck backed down the driveway, Luke was determined to help as much as he could. Father had brought in a friend from the neighborhood, a good natured man he and Danny knew as Uncle Jimbo.

"You think you can push this wheelbarrow when it's full of concrete?" Jimbo said and laughed.

"He'll do it," Father said, looking off at Mother, who sat in the shade of an oak, sipping her drink.

Luke couldn't quite push a full load, but he strained hard. Father and Jimbo worked relentlessly. Father shoveled the grey sludge with a barely constrained violence. He barked at Luke when he fell behind Jimbo. The day was hot for April and Luke could feel sweat popping from his brow, coating his body like oil. His hands began to slip on the wooden handles.

Finally, just when they had a few more loads to pour before they could begin to smooth out the wavy surface, Luke lost control and dumped the concrete on the grass. The slowly oozing mass spread over the lawn. Then Father was there beside him, pushing him roughly to the ground before righting the toppled wheel barrow. "Get out of the way, boy," he said. Luke slid himself back but couldn't get up. His muscles were wobbly, burning like his face.

Jimbo came over and offered his hand. "Don't mind him, Luke. He's jest in a hurry to get this done before it sets. He don't mean nothing by it." Luke shook his head. He walked down towards the garden, stopped and looked back at his father and Jimbo. They were talking and Father glanced at him. Luke turned away and saw before him in the grass a wriggling black question mark. Slowly, the snake raised its head as if to ask him something. The forked tongue shimmered, and Father's heavy hand was on his shoulder, sore and tender. "Listen, boy . . ." Luke wanted to hit him, to batter him with his fists. When he was a doctor, Father would be proud. They stood there, and the snake flicked its tongue, tasting the silence.

CHAPTER 16:

LA GUERRE

Luke rubbed his legs and tried to gather himself. The last few moments before he had crashed through the limbs of the tree, he heard the chatter of birds, then came a stillness. It was the peaceful stillness of deep waters. The wash in his ears now became a tinny buzz and he looked around and saw he was in an orchard. He took a few tentative steps. The ground felt soft and yielding. Splotched apples, withered and rotten, crunched under his boots. Everything was numb and heavy, the woozy world of laughing gas dreams.

Training kicked in. The world sped up, back to 4/4 time. He gathered the parachute, stowed it in a small shed, then threw away his college ring. No starting point to begin tracking and no identification except dog tags. A farmer materialized and began to motion, a funny little pantomime. Luke yelled, "You speak any English?" The farmer continued to gesticulate. Luke couldn't figure out what the man was trying to tell him, but he seemed to be holding an imaginary pitchfork and wanted to stick him. "Forget you." The farmer reminded Luke of a bandy rooster; all strut and posture but careful to keep a distance.

The steeple was his only landmark, rising just above the trees. A narrow dirt road skirted the orchard. Where was there to go? Luke walked back across the orchard, keeping his eye out for the farmer. He did not have high hopes for escape or the kindness of the villagers. He didn't even know if he was in Germany or France. The old farmer hadn't seemed too pleased to see

him. At the edge of the orchard, Luke came to a barbed wire fence coated with ice that winked in the sun. The wire seemed to hang like an open, mocking mouth.

He had been the last one. Back in the B-24, he gave the orders to bail and then began to haggle with Aiken, his co-pilot. “You go on,” he said, but initially Aiken refused. “Get the hell out,” Luke screamed over the jangle of the bell and then turned his attention back to the throttle which jerked so violently he felt the strain almost pull his shoulder out of socket. He looked back over and Aiken was gone. Ten of them and it was now just him. The sky was clutching him, tearing at his flak vest, pounding his head. Stiff fingers pried his mouth open and stole his breath away. A funny thought had occurred to him—he’d forgotten to wear his lucky belt. Somehow he knew that none of this would have happened if he’d just remembered to grab that crusty web belt on the way to briefing. The engine hacked convulsively, stopped; metal groaned and heaved. Then he was out. His ears popped and he awoke, flying. His body seemed to have disassociated itself from his mind which was still trying to find a way to land the plane. He pulled the ring and the silken chute slithered out and caught the air with a satisfying snap. He blessed their rigger Sergeant Truex. For several moments he was suspended over a town. Old brick houses blushed purple-red in the late afternoon sun. It would have been an idyllic scene if the steeple of church hadn’t looked like it was about to skewer him. He yanked on the shroud lines, lifted briefly and twisted away from this imminent danger before the reality of the earth announced itself. “Gravity’s a bitch,” Sergeant Reiger had said back in Pyote, Texas after some kid had smashed himself to pieces the second day on the Stearman.

*

The group of men from the village captured him easily enough. He had a Browning .45 and they all carried shot guns. For a moment he thought about going out in a blaze of glory, but these weren't soldiers. Some shivered with anger as though they wanted him to make a move, but most looked uneasy and did not even aim their guns at him but somewhere above his head. Luke raised his arms. "Okay fellas. You win." The old farmer Luke had seen when he first landed stood behind the group and shook his finger as if to say, "Naughty, naughty." They pushed him down, took his gun, and tied his wrists.

They led Luke to a nearby house, and several of the men went back out, going, Luke imagined, to find some authorities or soldiers who would deal with him. They sat him down in the kitchen and retied his hands to a chair. There was a woman cleaning dishes with a filthy rag. She came over to Luke and began to bathe a cut on his cheek which now started to smart under her ministrations. He hadn't known it was there. He could hear the men talking, sometimes yelling in the next room. His side ached fiercely, and he finally began to realize the sorry shape he was in. Now after about an hour, the adrenaline of the jump had worn off and he knew that he had some broken ribs because he was having trouble breathing. He was wheezing like Aunt Kyde who was dying of emphysema in the house back in South Carolina. How many nights had that stertorous and sinister rasping insinuated itself into his dreams, as though the devil himself was outside his door? She always smelled of Vick's Vapor Rub because she believed implacably in its curative powers. Maybe it helped her abide her room which had once housed the hunting dogs and now reeked of piss and must. Perhaps she had died by now. He did not often receive letters from his mother. The last indicated that she was taking in boarders because his father had

not sent any money in a good long while. While he mused on these things, the pain continued to become more insistent, like a stitch after a set of wind sprints.

Later the old woman wanted to give him an egg. She held one the color of toast between her thumb and index finger as if it was marvel to behold. Luke motioned first over his shoulder to his bound wrists then towards the guard who sat rolling another cigarette by the door. "*Nein, nein, nein*" the man said. The woman argued with him. "*Un kinder*," she replied. The man had a look of consternation on his face, then bemusement. "Okay" he said and snorted smoke from his nose. She turned back towards Luke and made a funny gesture. She put her hand on her chin and chomped her mouth. He had never eaten a raw egg before, even when he was trying to gain weight before football season. The woman cracked the egg on the kitchen table. He opened his mouth and she placed her hand on his forehead without tenderness. She made him to tilt his head back. The yolk slipped down his throat, leaving a film on his tongue He sucked on his cheeks, savored the glutinous remains. He was hungrier than he realized.

His thoughts turned to the rest of the crew. Where were they? Had they all managed to avoid capture and he was the only one pathetic enough to be taken prisoner by a bunch of rag tag farmers? He thought he heard the shrieks of children, the exultance of boys free for the day. They had come to gather and wait for a sight of him.

Finally, some other men came back to get Luke and led him through the streets of the town. The roiling pack of boys tagged along behind, giggling and occasionally breaking into a little chant. The gist seemed to be, "You are caught, You are shot. You are caught, You are shot." They followed him until he was taken inside what appeared to be the jail.

The constable stood there behind his desk, smoking a pipe. He didn't look much like any kind of sheriff Luke knew, specifically the skint-headed, soft-bellied Neanderthal who had once put him in jail for a couple of nights down in Myrtle Beach for loitering. This constable was a tiny man, a dwarf almost, and he looked at Luke with shrewd, mirthful black eyes as though he were an oddity at the circus, some freak to be pondered.

"*So sind Sie der Mann*," he said and raised his eyebrows.

Luke didn't have a clue what he was saying.

The constable pinched his forehead and muttered "Ach." "*So*," he repeated, then he pointed his finger at Luke. "*Sie . . . Luftwaffe. Luftwaffe*." He made a flying motion.

"No Luftwaffe," Luke said, because he had been taught never to admit being shot down.

"*Nien Luftwaffe*?" The constable was confused now. "No . . . fly? Where?" He walked two fingers across the desk and shook his head. Then he held up his palm and dropped it down. "*Luftwaffe. Fallschirm*."

"All right, sure," Luke said and nodded. "Have it your way. Luftwaffe."

The constable gave a look that said, "Good, that's settled," and directed one of the men to go somewhere. The remaining two men started to strip off Luke's clothes.

Luke struggled for a moment and then motioned that he would do it. "Keep your hands to yourself." He gave them his bomber jacket, then his dress pants and shirt. Still they clucked at him, demanding that he strip completely naked.

One of them had the Browning tucked in his belt and he brought it out now and handed it to the constable who began to fumble with it. The other twirled Luke around as though he might have something else hidden down there. Then they started to pick up articles of clothing, methodically examining each for signs of some secret pocket.

"I'm being patient here fellas, but it's cold as a witch's titty."

Meanwhile the constable was still fooling with the handgun.

"You're gonna get yourself shot."

The other men forgot about Luke and went over to help the constable. They couldn't seem to get the bullet un-chambered. They were so enthralled for a moment that Luke could have walked out the door. Instead, he padded over to them, bareassed as he was, and reached up to take the gun. "Let me show you, for God's sake."

When they became aware of Luke they all started to shout and put their arms out as if he was a vicious dog they were trying to hold at bay. The constable pointed the Browning at him, looking more like Charlie Chaplain than anything and Luke began to laugh. He sat down on the cold floor and laughed until he cried.

A two-wheel cart came up the road pulled by big laboring horses. Their sullen heads bobbed in unison slowly. Luke was frozen with weariness. One of the men had coveted Luke's jacket, but the constable had given him a dressing down and made him hand it back over to Luke. The man mumbled what sounded like a peevish apology as the constable looked on and smiled to himself. Luke could tell that the constable was honorable and contrary. In some indefinable way the man reminded him of his father, Alistair Caldwell. Maybe it was the ironic gleam that burned in the constable's eyes as though he were about to wink at you. Luke's father had been a conductor for Southern Railway, criss-crossing the country for years, sometimes bringing him along. Luke recalled the arc of light cutting through darkness, whiff of hay and cow from the countryside whipping past, his father offering him butterscotch. A brown streak of spittle stained the stubble on his father's chin. Sometimes in the yards they would walk down the

line looking for bums, his father carrying a type of shot gun he called a "trench broom" which he had used in the Great War. And in the summer, his father could cut a water melon in two, clasp in turn each half between his knees, and methodically scoop out the watery flesh with a big spoon, eating everything seeds and all. Gone now, disappeared one day only to be heard from in post cards or money orders.

The constable helped him up into the cart and they started a painful bumping course down the cobblestone street. More it seemed for his own amusement than protection, the constable still carried the Browning. A few times he poked Luke in the back and said, "Eh, eh?" as though he wanted Luke to make a run for it. An occasional gawker stood out front of his house and shouted as they went past. One man ran beside them, his face transfigured by some kind of grief, some kind of unbearable pain. "*Pour quoi*?" he screamed. "*Pour quoi*?" Luke knew well enough what that meant. They must be close to France at least. The constable had to call his name, "Herr Hartmann, Herr Hartmann," and then placated him in a soothing tone with some other words Luke couldn't follow. Luke watched him fade into the shadows of twilight. "*Pour quoi*?" the constable muttered to himself and shrugged his shoulders as if he had no answer to the question either. "*La guerre*," he said and shook the reins.

On the outskirts of town, they stopped before a slightly disreputable looking brick house. The shudders were askew, resting sideways like quizzical eyebrows on the two windows which glowed orange. The constable hopped out and indicated to Luke to sit tight, that he had some business to attend to. At the door, Luke could see him outlined as he began a conversation with some unseen force. Force rather than person seemed appropriate to Luke anyway because the constable was simpering and had flattened himself against the door frame as the argument got louder. Finally, he waved out to Luke and a woman's sharp nose and crow eye appeared and then

jerked back to wherever she came from. The constable threw up his hands and began to trudge down the porch stairs. The door slammed and he began to walk differently, to strut almost, and he brushed some imaginary dust off his shoulders as if to say, "That's that."

"She don't believe you," Luke said. "She thinks you're just setting up some excuse to get soused."

The constable sighed.

"Women," Luke said and the other man nodded gravely.

Despite his ribs and the stiff rope around his wrists, he almost managed to doze off when he heard the rumble of air planes. He smelled something like creosote. "Up," the soldier said. He might have been SS but Luke couldn't be sure. Playtime was over. The soldier looked like he would gun Luke down right there.

The constable was in deep conversation with an officer. No doubt he was explaining how heroic he had been and how he had brought Luke here at great cost of time and effort. Couldn't he have something to show for it? However, the officer was unimpressed and waved the constable off, leaving him to look down at his boots and curse. Then he lifted his eyes up and saw Luke. He gave a curt wave. "*Au revoir*."

"Take it easy," Luke said. The soldier then jerked him around, but he managed to glance back at the constable standing there like a lost child, uncertain what to do next.

"*Au revoir, pilote*," he yelled, a trace of kindness in his voice.

Luke was taken to an empty gymnasium near the air strip. A few other flyers sat against the wall, but none were from his crew. They eyed him as he came in. The guards took him across the hall to a chair beside a small window. The window panes were blackened with soot. Then he

was shoved down in the chair, his back to the window. A pilot who could speak English came to ask him questions.

"You are shot down, yes?" the man continually said.

He shook his head. "Engine trouble." Three yellow-nosed ME 109s had caught the group with their pants down and raked over the "Dixie Jane" before he could pull her up into the he clouds. But he didn't feel like giving the man the satisfaction of knowing this. "Engine trouble," he said and shook his head, as though he were sorry not to oblige his interrogator's most urgent desires.

Another man walked in. He had the air of exhaustion and tossed a set of goggles on the floor and stood before him, fixing his deep blue eyes on a spot just above his head. Luke thought he heard a dog barking.

"This is the man who shot you down," the interrogator said with satisfaction.

The blue-eyed fighter pilot laughed and disappeared through a door.

"You are tired?" the interrogator said.

"Yes."

"Then you rest."

He did not sleep well, drifted in and out of dreams in which his college coach kept telling him to run. It seemed he would never stop running. In the morning, a medic came to check on him. After he pointed to his side and grimaced, the medic seemed to gather what was wrong and wrapped his chest with a roll of cloth. The medic also sewed up his cut, paying no attention to Luke's protests.

"Jesus Christ, is that leader line?" He could feel his skin pucker and his whole face felt like it he was wearing a mask that fit too tight.

Despite his pains he was too exhausted not to sleep some more before he was awakened by a familiar drawl.

"I believe we're going for a ride soon." The man beside him was closely watching the soldiers stream in and out of the hall. Many pilots walked by in their fur lined jackets, sometimes kicking one of the sleeping prisoners' heels as a joke.

"Don't I know you?" the man said, offering his hand. "Fifer Jay."

"Luke Caldwell."

"Oh yes. I thought so when I first saw you come in with that red hair. I went to Westside. You played for the Green Wave. Got a scholarship. I remember seeing that in the paper. Big Red Caldwell. Football star."

"You're from Richton?"

"Born and bred. Never made it to the university. I'm a lot scrawnier than you, as you can see. Mill got me instead."

"I done spent some time over at Alice mill." He knew the rooms, damp as caves but never quiet, the looms gyrating and thumping, motes of cotton fiber floating in the air, sticking in your chest like burrs. He wouldn't go back if he could help it. But his brother was the smart one, was in medical school in Charleston right now; the whole town had given money so Roy could go. Luke was only good at football. The letter offering him 3500 a year, embossed with the cobalt blue NY Giants logo sat in his desk drawer at home. He was drafted in the 3rd round. That was never going to happen now.

"I know Alice. And Cateechee and Norris, too. Suppose everyone finds their way over to the mill eventually," Fifer said. "Say did you know Horace Alewine?" Some guards approached and they grew silent

"*Halt den Mund*!" The guard sneered at them. He motioned for the group to get up. They were a haggard bunch. Luke winced every time he took a breath. A few other men looked like they had been beaten up or had landed roughly.

"*Schnell. Schnell*."

Soldiers were everywhere. Luke kept from meeting anyone's eye, but he could see the obvious looks of enmity. He didn't begrudge them their anger. Maybe he had bombed their home town. Everything happened so fast on a mission that he rarely considered these things. He usually had enough to worry about just staying in the air. They were finally corralled into a truck. The cold leaked through the thin canvas and he shivered uncontrollably.

After a long winding drive, he could hear familiar hoots and hisses, the ruckus of men. A train was nearby. Luke and Fifer and two other POWs were shoved into a car with five or six German soldiers.

"Here we go. A grand adventure," Fifer said and laughed.

In the night, he awoke to the motion of the train and the wind stinging his eyes. He had fallen asleep near a chink. He saw the faint aura of snow in the muddy darkness. In his experience, snow was a rarity. The exception being one winter when school had to be cancelled for a week because the town had no snow ploughs. He could still remember sliding down Felcher's hill on a trash can lid with Roy, going so fast that they couldn't stop from cascading into the forest and slamming into an oak. Roy's nose broken and painted with blood. The

shocked look on his face as the globules of red, bright red as poinsettias, stained the soft pristine snow.

"What's the date," Luke whispered to Fifer. He was sure that he was awake. Luke could almost feel him thinking, too.

"You just realized, huh? The 24th—Merry Christmas, Captain."

"Son of a bitch."

They arrived at their destination in the morning. When a soldier slid open the door, chunky snowflakes blew into the compartment. One alit and melted on the tip of Luke's nose. The cold pelted his bare face. They stepped off on the platform and he could see a mass of people forming a corridor barely held in check by a rim of soldiers.

"Shit," Fifer said.

"What?"

"I think we're in Frankfurt." Frankfurt had been the raid's target and as they walked out into the city, Luke could see the damage, the sagging burned out buildings and the shards of concrete, road, and glass littering the ground. Occasionally, a rock or a small slimy potato was aimed at them. A man with a carefully waxed van dyke beard and wearing a finely tailored suit hawked a glob of mucus onto Luke's cheek.

"Didn't your Momma raise you no better than that," Fifer yelled back at the man. The crowd began to thin out. The snow had stopped, but delicate flakes still clung to Luke's jacket. Occasionally, he would dip his head and lick a flake with the tip of his tongue, letting the dampness linger in his mouth for a moment until sucking the little bit of moisture down his throat.

Once, the guards stopped on a corner to light their cigarettes. Evening was coming on and the sky was monochrome, with darkness collecting in dreary shadows. A young girl, perhaps fourteen with tawny red hair, walked past pulling a wooden wagon. She was dressed in black with a black shawl pulled around her shoulders. Inside the wagon, Luke could see a bucket of apples and a few boxes wrapped in newspaper. The girl strode jauntily past and turned to smile at them. This smile seemed to radiate in the late afternoon gloom. For a moment, she imbued Luke with some of her happiness. She had no reason to smile at them. But her surplus of goodwill that day extended even to him, the man who had turned her town into a shell, a remnant of itself with the blackened eyes of broken windows leering at him. The smile warmed him, gave him clarity and hope. Not everyone hated. He would hold that smile in his mind for a long time.

That night they slept in individual cells, five by nine. Just as in the train, he had only a bucket to relieve himself. By this point his mind was numb. He had stopped thinking about the future or the past; he only existed from moment to moment, tearing into the course black bread they gave him for dinner as if it were his last meal. He read the walls which were etched with the hope and sorrow and boredom of the previous occupants:

I got a girl in Oklahoma City. Her legs is long and tan

Fuck the Krauts

There are 130 nails in the boards of the ceiling

Remember Jimmy V

I did my best

Luke thought about this last one as he waited for the interrogators. He knew if they kept him here for more than a day, then they really wanted something from him. He tried to clear his mind of

weakness, of all the little desires his body was crying out for: a hot shower, chocolate, a comb, roast beef with a mountainous pile of mashed potatoes, a nice pool of brown gravy on top . . . thinking about these things did him no good. He focused instead on his breathing, on the spasmodic pain that came with each breath which he could control a little if he took short huffs. He heard doors close and open, the tinkling of keys, and the jagged German voices. He didn't sleep exactly, but daydreamed, always aware in some part of his mind of the waiting, the anticipation of reprimand, rebuke. He walked down long halls, saw tall windows above him, with a milky light oozing down. The principal, who the kids all called Smiley because he never did, was holding a long paddle. Luke felt fear at the sight. He tried to look for an escape then awoke to the ache in his ribs.

Finally, the door opened and he was taken for questioning. This man was more professional and reminded Luke of the actor Ronald Coleman. He had what looked like a file before him and he read from it occasionally, asking pointed questions in very elegant English. He told Luke that he had gone to Oxford. Luke only repeated his name, rank, and serial number. This went on for two sessions then the interrogator read to him the answers to all his questions, perhaps so Luke would understand the futility of his silence. Heroism, patriotism, whatever you wanted to call it, added up to nothing here. This man wanted to get under his skin.

"Your hometown is, let us see, Easily, South Carolina."

"Easley," Luke corrected.

"And you went to the university to play football. Were you good at this game?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"I imagine. Americans specialize in brutish, senseless games."

He was put back in a bigger room with some other men, along with a few officers like himself from their looks. He noticed Fifer leaning on his haunches in the corner but only nodded. They both knew there was the possibility of spies, that any one of these men could be a German plant. No one said a word, though Luke could tell from the look in some of their eyes, that particular white gleam, that some were almost going crazy from the effort. Occasionally these men would whistle or hum a tune, smiling to themselves as though savoring some lovely memory. Luke also drifted back into himself, his head heavy and polluted, as though he were sick. He thought of the times spent in bed home from school, blankets piled on top of him by his mother, who would occasionally stand silently in the door, outlined by light. He could almost see the fretting hands, nervous like twin hummingbirds in the darkness. It felt good to be so helpless, to be so close to that indefinable sensation when you give yourself to exhaustion and just sleep, not caring if you wake up.

The train carried them towards the coast. At least it felt like north to Luke. They traveled mostly at night and pulled off on side rails during the day. In the mornings, the guards would allow them to stretch and dump out the bucket of shit and piss. Luke walked to the edge of the forest. It seemed impenetrable, encapsulated in gloom. "*Angegangen*," the guards called when he strayed too far. They did not seem to worry about him escaping.

"*Schnell*," the guards yelled. Slowly, he turned back to face the train. The other men huddled against each other. They were phantoms blurred by the cold. It was as though he was looking at the world through a pane of ice.

German seemed like the language of the underworld. He sat and listened to the soldiers spit out words like half-masticated bits of meat. Roy had studied it in college, calling German the tongue of the philosophers. He would like to see Roy crouch on the rim of that pail in the corner, and hear the "philosophers" hurl insults as he tottered and tried to keep his balance when the train buffeted across some rough patch of tracks. It was not much different than flying really. He felt every bump because of his ribs. The cut on his cheek was inflamed. "That don't look too good," Fifer said to him. "Better check yourself into a hospital."

"I felt worse," Luke said, but they both knew he was lying.

"Shore am getting cramped." Fifer had short, wasp-like legs compared to Luke's. He had plenty of room, but Luke nodded his head. He was intent on his stoicism.

"You're quiet for a redhead, you know. Hardly say a peep. I thought redheads was supposed to be the life of the party."

"Sorry to disappoint your expectations. This ain't exactly Myrtle Beach."

But Fiffer seemed to be warming to the subject and wouldn't let it go. "Maybe it's just the ladies? What applies to a woman don't work for a man?"

"Maybe so."

"I mean, I've known a few firecracker redheads in my day. Sassy." Fifer was getting animated. Luke thought his last name suited him. He was like a bird. His eyes darted around greedily as though he was looking over a whole lineup of Rita Hayworths. The guards growled at him. "Maybe we should ask Adolf and Heinie what they think. I'm sure they'd have something to offer to this conversation." Fifer turned towards them and raised his hand like he was signaling the waiter in a fancy restaurant. "Hey Fellas, your opinion on something."

"Now you done it." One of the guards stood up, strode over the sleeping body of one of their comrades and put his boot hard and square in Fifer's hip bone.

"Shit fire." Luke tried to get up, to get at the guard, but Fifer held him back. "My fault, buddy. You sit and cool your heels. You don't need any of that with your ribs. See, he's content now. See how happy that made him?"

Luke closed his eyes. His tried to calm his breathing.

"Now of course, getting back to the matter at hand, my sis has a flaming mass of hair and she's just as sullen and shy as you. So that kinda confuses the issue even further."

Luke grunted and pretended to fall asleep.

"You should come over and meet her sometime. Ya'll would get along. You could just sit in the parlor and sigh and hmm."

Luke cracked his eye. "Pretty?"

"Sure, I guess. If you like sulky."

Luke thought of the Frankfurt girl's face again, her hair glowing like neon in the dying light. The apples in her cart gleaming, too. He could see her holding out an apple to him and he wanted to take it. The waxen flesh was cool on his lips when Fifer nudged him.

"I was thinking of something funny."

Luke grunted but assented to listen some more. He realized that he had made some type of promise to this man now, that he needed an audience and Luke was it.

"My pappy would bring me things, you see. He would find something he thought was wonderful like a robin's egg fallen from a nest, all light and delicate. Just anything that caught his eye. Ma, 'course, thought this stuff was junk. Once, though, he give me this vial of quicksilver. I never seen anything so beautiful. Poured it in a bowl. Watched it slide around.

Here's where I got in trouble. Took Ma's wedding ring which she often left off while washing the clothes. Took it because it almost fit on my ten year old finger and dipped it in that quicksilver. That's what you call a transportation from gold to silver. Slid it on and wore it the whole afternoon before Ma noticed it was gone. I got a royal hiding for that." Fifer chuckled, and Luke found himself thinking about his own beatings as a child. His mother was the nervous type and hated to punish him. She'd say "This will hurt me more than it hurts you," and mean it. Alistair, though, took a relish in it. "Boy, this is gonna rattle your bones so you remember to mind. This is gonna make your ass as red as a baboon's."

Fifer was still talking, would keep talking until he ran out of breath. Then he'd rest up and start again. "That quicksilver, though, it stuck to my skin like a tattoo. Couldn't wash it off for days. Come to find out, it's poison. Might explain some things, I suppose."

"I reckon it hadn't had any effect on your mouth."

"Point taken. When you figure we'll get there?"

"Soon enough," Luke said. "Soon enough." He knew then that they would get through whatever was to come. He would take Fifer up on his offer, and one day there he would be on the Jay's front step, holding his hat in his hand, as he yelled out, "Private, a word please." The family would all come bubbling out, and Fifer would slap him on the back, saying, "This here is Red. We knew each other from the camp. Man, can this boy play football." And maybe Fifer's sister would be as pretty as he said. Maybe she'd look like the girl in Frankfurt, with the same warm smile. Maybe so.

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NOTES

[1]This observation is not particularly original. Many, including the top professional players, hold that knowing the people you are playing with and how they may behave when put under pressure is the integral part of the game. Certainly luck plays a role in poker, as does a knowledge of probabilities, but nothing can replace the ability to inhabit and intuit the other players' thought processes. Roy Cook has made a similar point in *Card Player Magazine*: "Poker is a people game . . . If you want to be successful at the game, you need to be able to read people, get into their heads, think how they think [. . .]" (qtd. in Schoonmaker 6).

[2]While "Hills Like White Elephants" is still one of my favorite stories, it is woefully inadequate in revealing the characters' inner lives. Is the American really as callous about having the abortion as he sounds? I tend to think no, but what do I have to go on ultimately? When he takes the bags to the other side of the station and then goes to have a drink alone, what is he thinking? He looks at the people and sees them as "reasonably" waiting for the train, which would suggest he thinks Jig has been unreasonable. But there has to be more. And, at the end, what are we to make of Jig's bright smile and her statement that she feels "fine"? It seems ironic or perhaps a suppression of her true feelings. Perhaps it is a capitulation to the American's desires. Maybe it is relief; she has finally revealed him for what he is and she sees some type of course before her, even if it is a bad one. Or maybe, just maybe, it is a genuine smile of happiness because the American has relented and has conceded that they should make a go of it and have the baby. All of these interpretations have a certain validity. I used to enjoy the

indeterminacy of this ending, but now I want something more. Not closure exactly, but at least a reasonable sense of where each of the characters are at emotionally at the end of the story.

[3]What constitutes ace-rag is debatable in poker circles, but is generally any ace and a numbered card. This hand can be problematic because even if you pair your ace, you could have "kicker" problems. Another player could easily have a higher ace. It is not very smart to call a raise with a hand like ace-three, but people do it all the time. Suited connectors are two consecutive cards of the same suit (seven-eight of diamonds, for example). These cards have very little raising value before the flop, but they often make strong and unlikely hands if the right cards fall. Crafty players value suited connectors as much as big pairs. In poker, the position in which you sit relative to the first actor in the pot (who must decide if he will call, check, or raise) is of vital importance. The more you know about the strength of your opponents based on their bets (or lack of bets), the better informed you are to make a good decision. The final person to act sits on the "button." Some people consistently abuse the button, raising with marginal hands and hoping that their position will help them take down the pot rather than the strength of their hand. An astute observer will occasionally "pop" these players with a big re-raise, usually leaving them no option but to fold their wilting hand.